



REMEMBERING  
**OUR  
LEADERS**

VOLUME  
**6**



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# DADABHAI NAOROJI

J. C. Mehta



“Is it vanity that I should take a great pleasure in being hailed as the Grand Old Man of India? No, that title, which speaks volumes for the warm, grateful and generous hearts of my countrymen, is to me, whether I deserve it or not, the highest reward of my life.”

Dadabhai Naoroji

# DADABHAI NAOROJI

India was passing through one of the darkest periods of its history during Dadabhai Naoroji's lifetime. The British were extending and consolidating their stranglehold on India. The Indian rajas and maharajas who, traditionally, provided leadership against foreign aggression, had been completely subjugated.

The Indian people, their economic and social life at its lowest ebb, their spirit broken, had resigned themselves to their fate. The country was being bled white, without a whimper from the people, as if under the spell of anaesthesia.

Unlike the earlier invaders of India, the British did not come in hordes, marauding and plundering. They quietly entered through trade channels. Taking advantage of the mutual rivalries of the local rulers, aiding and abetting one against the other, the British had grabbed the whole country and held it as their property. To get rich quick at the cost of India was their only aim. The methods of exploitation employed by them were too subtle for the

innocent Indians to understand, and too numerous.

In addition, the British, with their different looks, dress, language and culture, maintained a separate and superior identity, as if born to rule. To add insult to injury, they contemptuously called the Indians 'kala admi' (black man) and considered them uncivilized and inferior in character and intelligence.

At such a time there appeared on the scene Dadabhai Naoroji, who provided selfless and sustained leadership to the nation. On the one hand he roused the people from their slumber, and on the other, raised a voice of protest against the continued exploitation of the country by the British, and the continued poverty of the people. The story of Dadabhai's life is a saga of selfless devotion to the motherland, a peerless patriot.

## **Early life**

Dadabhai was born on September 4, 1825, in a poor, priestly, Parsi family in Bombay. His father, Naoroji Palanji Dordi, died when Dadabhai was about four years old. His mother, Maneckbai, toiled hard to bring him up. Though illiterate herself, she gave Dadabhai the best English education and imparted to him a noble character.

At school Dadabhai displayed exceptional intelligence and skill in mental arithmetic. Being fair-complexioned, good-looking and slender in build, he caught everyone's notice. Elders often called him 'Jonglo' (Englishman).

Dadabhai received his higher education at the Elphinstone Institution (now College) at Bombay. At

college also he made a mark with his extraordinary intelligence and distinguished himself in English and Mathematics. Professor Orlebar, one of his teachers, called him 'the promise of India'. Sir Erskine Perry, the then Chief Justice of Bombay and the President of the Board of Education, impressed by his performance at studies, offered to pay half of the expenses if Dadabhai was sent to England for higher studies. But Parsi elders, who were to bear the other half, turned down the offer, fearing that in England he might get converted to Christianity and marry an English girl, like many other young men of his time who had earlier gone to England.

After completion of his education, Dadabhai got the job of the Head Native Assistant Master at the Elphinstone Institution. Soon he was promoted to Assistant Professor and two years later, Professor of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy—the first Indian to hold this post. Dadabhai considered it the greatest event of his career.

## **Reformer**

Having settled in a comfortable career, Dadabhai turned his attention to social reform. He believed in the equality of men and women. Observing that the backwardness of Indian women was due to the illiteracy prevailing among them, he started his work with women's education

With the help of the Students' Literary and Scientific Society of the Elphinstone Institution, Dadabhai began free literacy classes for girls in Marathi and Gujarati on

August 4, 1849. But he met with formidable resistance from the orthodox people. They refused to send their girls to the classes to save them from the 'corrupting' influence of education. It took him months of patient persuasion, of going from door to door, to collect enough girls initially.

In due course people realized the benefits of women's education and provided suitable buildings for two girls' schools. Dadabhai and his volunteers worked as honorary teachers in these schools. The rich Cama family provided the finance for two years. Thereafter the public took over the financing and management of these schools, and opened more such. Education for girls came to be accepted as a norm.

This pioneering work of Dadabhai and his dedicated volunteers was highly appreciated. The Governor of Bombay applauded it as "an epoch in the history of education in the Bombay Presidency".

Dadabhai also fought against many other injustices then prevailing against women.

For the education of adult menfolk, Dadabhai established the Dnyan Prasarak Mandali (Society for Promotion of Knowledge). Topics of general awareness were discussed before large gatherings, in local languages. Lectures on subjects of popular science, accompanied with demonstrations, drew large audiences. In a few years there was a perceptible change in the general awareness of the people and a transformation in their ideas and way of life.

Dadabhai's social work was not confined to education alone. He founded the Widow Remarriage Association,

the Parsi Gymnasium, the Irani Fund, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Framji Cowasji Institute, and a network of Temperance Societies all over the country. He helped these organizations in their activities by personal involvement and guidance, donations and by collecting funds from other sources.

To foster his reform movement and for spread of progressive ideas, Dadabhai founded on November 15, 1851, a fortnightly, *Rast Guftar* (Truth Teller) in Gujarati. The finance for it came from his friend, Khurshedji Nusserwanji Cama, and Dadabhai worked for it without remuneration. The paper carried no advertisements and was initially distributed free of cost. In later years Dadabhai started some more journals as and when he felt there was a need.

## **In politics**

The East India Company worked in India on a twenty-year Charter (lease), granted by the British Government in England. The Charter issued to the Company in 1833 was to expire in 1853. In 1852 the Company applied for its renewal. The educated Indians, who held the Company responsible for the miseries of India, decided to oppose the request for extension.

Despite his government service, Dadabhai played a leading role in organizing a large meeting at the Elphinstone Institution. On August 26, 1852, the Bombay Association—the first political organization in Bombay Presidency—was formed. A strong petition, opposing the

renewal of the Charter, was sent to the British Government in England.

Though the petition could not stop the renewal of the Charter, it did create a stir in England. Many right-thinking English leaders spoke and wrote in support of India's demands. It dispelled a lot of ignorance about India in England. Dadabhai learnt that organized, intelligent agitation paid dividends.

This was his first taste of politics, and Dadabhai—the academician, turned into Dadabhai—the politician.

### **Analysis of ills**

Dadabhai felt that all the ills of India, like poverty, ignorance, famines and so on were due to the British misrule. But their misrule was not deliberate, because, as he had read in books, the British were a fair-minded and justice-loving people. The harm to India was done by their ignorance of the Indian way of life and the needs of the Indian people. In his maiden speech before the Bombay Association, Dadabhai, therefore, said, "Under the British Government we do not suffer any great zoolum... Whatever evil we have to complain of, originates from one cause, namely, the ignorance of European officers, coming fresh from home."

As a corrective he demanded small concessions such as Indians be appointed to higher posts and be involved in administration and legislation; the competitive examinations for the Indian Civil Service (I.C.S.) be held in India and England simultaneously; Indian students be

given scholarships for training in England; and, the expenditure of Indian administration be reduced and England bear the share of expenditure which was legitimately theirs. Dadabhai had to put up a long struggle for extracting such concessions, which may appear insignificant today.

As a remedy, Dadabhai had a threefold programme in mind: a) to educate the Indian masses and to make them conscious of their rights. In this direction he had already made a start through his educational and other programmes; b) to educate the British bureaucracy in India about the problems of India. For this purpose he wrote petitions to the Governors and the Viceroy against all their wrong policies and explaining to them what was beneficial for India; and c) to educate the British public and their Parliament (which appointed and controlled the Government of India) about the problems of India. This required a long stay in England, which a man of Dadabhai's means could not afford to do.

At this juncture, the Cama family's decision to set up a business firm in England, and to take Dadabhai as a partner, came as a windfall. To the dismay of everyone, he readily resigned his Professorship and accepted the Camas' offer. Principal Harkness, taking it as Dadabhai's preference for money, exclaimed, "Dadabhai, what a fall!"

But for Dadabhai a comfortable career and everything else was secondary to the country's cause. What people might have taken as his preference for money was, in fact, a self-imposed exile for the sake of the motherland. Leaving his young wife, Gulbai, and children to the care

of his old mother and a friend, Dadabhai sailed for England on June 27, 1855.

Besides educating the British, another important aim in Dadabhai's going to England was to take care of the Indian students who went there for higher studies and for competing for the I.C.S. Away from home, in a vastly different climatic and social environment, these youngsters faced many hardships. Dadabhai acted as their guide and guardian. He not only looked after their physical comforts but also kept them together and cultivated in them a national pride.

Mahatma Gandhi, when he went to England for his Bar-at-Law degree in 1888, sought his guardianship. Says Mahatma Gandhi of Dadabhai, "...Indeed, he was in the place of father to every one of the Indian students... And so Dadabhai became a real 'dada' to me."

The business was smooth and profitable. But to Dadabhai's dislike, Cama & Co. was also trading in articles like opium and liquor which, in his opinion, ruined the consumers and their families. Dadabhai could not persuade himself to pocket the profits from such a trade. He, therefore, parted company with the Camas.

In 1859 he set up the Dadabhai Naoroji & Co. in England. Here he could follow his own standards of honesty and morality. He proved to the world that one can become rich through honesty and without dealing in things like opium and liquor.

Once, with the cessation of the Civil War in America, most business enterprises in England collapsed. Those who owed large sums to Dadabhai, could not pay him. Still Dadabhai cleared not only his own liabilities but

even those of others for whom he had stood surety. Though in this way, he brought ruin on himself, he earned a name for honesty and character. With the help of friends his business picked up, and he became rich again.

## **India calling**

By and by his patriotic work occupied the better part of Dadabhai's time; and his business receded into the background. For some time he tried to run it with the help of his managers, but ultimately, in 1881, he had to close it down.

From 1855 to 1907 Dadabhai lived alternately in England and India, more for the sake of his patriotic pursuits than for his family or business. In England he wanted to create an awareness about India among the people and the Members of Parliament, and to win friends and sympathizers for it. For this purpose he joined several learned societies and earnestly participated in their activities. He delivered speeches and wrote articles in their journals and newspapers about Indian problems.

Dadabhai also founded some new societies like the London Indian Society in 1865 and the East India Association on December 1, 1866. The latter had members who had retired as high ranking officers from India. Some of them were now Members of Parliament or had access to them. Through the activities of these associations Dadabhai could win many friends for India, inside and outside Parliament. Through them he was able to oppose any measure that was likely to harm the

interests of India, or Indian students in England or Indians in South Africa. Frequently he got questions tabled and discussions raised in Parliament about Indian problems. Finding the East India Association more active and useful, Dadabhai set up its branches at Bombay, Calcutta and Madras.

In his bold criticism of the British, Dadabhai held them responsible for the poverty and ignorance in India, and even for its famines and plagues, because they did not take preventive measures. He asserted that the British ruled India not for Indians. Also they did not rule over India as they ruled in Britain. Dadabhai acted as an unofficial ambassador of India and never let anything said against India go uncontradicted.

The first success for Dadabhai came when, in 1866, the Secretary of State for India had to agree to appoint to the I.C.S., nine Indians out of sixty, by nomination. It was a triumph for Dadabhai, although appointment by nomination was not to his liking.

## **Dewan**

For the many organizations that Dadabhai had set up, he had often to go round on fund-raising missions. He even approached the rulers of Indian states for this purpose. Dadabhai was popular among them because he often gave them informal advice on their affairs. Some of the rulers gave him liberal donations.

One of them, Mulharrao Gaekwar, the Maharaja of Baroda, was always in trouble because of his misrule

and nefarious deeds. The Government had appointed an Inquiry Commission to go into his misdeeds. Feeling that none except Dadabhai could help him out, the Maharaja appointed him his Dewan (Prime Minister) in 1874. Dadabhai accepted the office very reluctantly.

The British Resident at Baroda did not like Dadabhai, and started sending to the Government baseless, adverse reports against Dadabhai. Rather than taking any action against Dadabhai, the Government admonished the Resident and transferred him from Baroda. Such was the high esteem in which Dadabhai was held by the British Government, whose rule he had always criticized.

In a year's time Dadabhai cleaned up and reformed the whole administration of Baroda and brought about all-round honesty and efficiency. Now that the threat of the inquiry had receded, the wily Maharaja and his scheming courtiers started feeling ill at ease under the strict discipline and honesty imposed by the Dewan. Sensing the feelings of the Maharaja, Dadabhai resigned the Dewanship in 1875 and left for Bombay. In a couple of days he got the news that the Maharaja, who had been secretly rejoicing at the departure of Dadabhai, had been dethroned and arrested.

Before going back to England Dadabhai joined the Bombay Municipal Corporation in 1875 as an elected member and was also elected to its Finance Committee. During his short stay there, he earned the gratitude of the Corporation by effecting a large saving in expenditure on the new waterworks and in payment of interest on loans.

## **The 'Drain Theory'**

Dadabhai had a special talent for mathematics, money and public finance. Putting in years of hard work in collecting statistics, he propounded his Drain Theory which, in brief, states: the inevitable consequence of foreign domination is the drain of wealth of the subject nation to the country of the rulers.

Dadabhai, therefore, held the British Government of India squarely responsible for the grinding poverty of India, and further said that this impoverishment was increasing every year. He proved that the average annual income of an Indian was barely Rs. 20 and that the taxation was high. Though sunk in poverty, India was loaded with the 'lordliest and costliest' administration in the world. He cited the example of the Prime Minister of England who was paid a salary of Rs. 5,000 per month while the Governor-General of India was paid Rs. 20,000 per month, out of the Indian exchequer.

Examining the import and export figures for 37 years, Dadabhai proved that India's exports exceeded its imports by Rs. 50 crores annually. But this money was never paid to India. On the contrary, India was always shown in a state of deficit. He laid bare to the British people and the world, all the cunning methods employed by the rulers to carry away India's wealth.

On Dadabhai's insistence, a Select Committee of both Houses of Parliament was appointed to look into the administration of India. But it came to nought with the premature dissolution of Parliament. Dadabhai was getting disillusioned with the 'justice-loving' British. In

one of his writings he said, “England has, in reality, been the most disastrous and destructive foreign invader of India.” Frustrated, he wrote to the Secretary of State for India, “Failure to redress (the grievances) would drive the people to a boycott, not only of the British wares but of the British rule.” How prophetic it proved later!

The British paid no heed to Dadabhai’s entreaties and warnings. On the contrary, their attitude hardened. To place the evils of the British rule before the world, Dadabhai compiled all his papers, petitions and statements into a big book and got it published in England, under the title: *Poverty and the Un-British Rule in India*. This monumental book is still read with interest by students of Indian economics.

## **Indian National Congress**

The most important event in India’s freedom struggle was the foundation of the Indian National Congress by A. O. Hume in 1885. Dadabhai helped in its establishment and was one of its founder members. The Congress took the country by storm, swiftly promoting unity and a sense of nationalism among the people. The freedom movement, so far limited to a few educated leaders, became a people’s struggle; that is what Dadabhai had so long been working for.

From then onwards, whether in India or in England, the Congress was always in Dadabhai’s thoughts. He nourished it through its infancy, defended it against criticism and guarded it against divisive tendencies. He

presided over three sessions of the Congress: in 1886 (Calcutta), 1893 (Lahore) and 1906 (Calcutta).

In 1906 the Congress was in real danger of splitting into two, because of the emergence of a militant group within it. Dadabhai was specially called from England to preside over the session at Calcutta to save a break-up. With his mature wisdom he kept the Congress together. It was at this session that he demanded 'Swaraj' or self-rule for India for the first time from the Congress platform. He said, "Good government could never be a substitute for government by the people themselves... We do not ask for any favour, we want only justice. The whole matter can be compressed into one word, self-government or 'Swaraj'... Swaraj is the only remedy for India's ills."

## **Member of Parliament**

Many might have considered it audacious on the part of Dadabhai when, in 1886, he contested the election to the House of Commons from the Holborn constituency of London. However, it was a proud day for Dadabhai, for India and for the Liberal Party when, in 1892, he was declared elected from Central Finsbury—the first Indian member of the Imperial Parliament, on the British votes! It was like bearding the lion in his own den. There was jubilation in India as well as in England. This was a practical proof of the liberality of the British people and the popularity of Dadabhai in England.

The House of Commons, where hitherto his friends projected his ideas, Dadabhai was now present himself

to fight his own battles. Soon he established himself as a mature parliamentarian and won the respect of the members of the ruling party as well as the opposition. He spoke forcefully on matters relating to currency, exchange, money and finance, especially where they related to India. He fought for Indians in South Africa and for Indian students in England.

Even though he belonged to the opposition, he surprised the Government by getting a resolution passed for holding the preliminary examination for the I.C.S. simultaneously in India and England. A bigger achievement was to get appointed in 1895, a Royal Commission on Indian expenditure, the Wilby Commission, for the judicious apportionment of administrative and military expenditure between England and India. He was made a member of this Commission, the first Indian to work in this capacity.

He presented his views to the Commission in two lengthy statements and also gave evidence as a witness. In his oral evidence Dadabhai boldly said that people in India did not want any British officers below the Viceroy, the Governors and the Commander-in-Chief; and in due course the Indians would get rid of them, too. Dadabhai forcefully drove home the inequities that India suffered in sharing of expenditure with England. The Government accepted the findings of the Commission and started correcting its financial malpractices in India.

After his election to Parliament, when Dadabhai came to India to preside over the Lahore session of the Congress in 1893, he received a hero's welcome at the Bombay port. The Governor of Bombay was the first to greet him.

Tumultuous crowds greeted him with garlands at every station from Bombay to Lahore and back, whatever the hour of the train's arrival.

After presiding over the Calcutta session of the Congress in December 1906, Dadabhai left for England. Reaching England on February 8, 1907, he got an attack of bronchitis, which persisted. On the advice of his doctors and his British friends, he retired from active public life, reluctantly though, as his crusade for self-rule had just begun. On October 12, 1907, Dadabhai bade farewell to England.

Back in India, he settled down at his house in Versova, Bombay. In his native climate, he soon recovered from his illness. His mind and pen became active once again.

### **In retirement**

Till his last days, Dadabhai's home was a place of pilgrimage for the leaders and the laity alike. He was visited by the Indian leaders and even the British Governors and Viceroys. He was consulted on all important political and economic issues relating to India. His interest in the Congress affairs never waned.

Everyday Dadabhai received a heavy mail from within India and abroad. It was a bewildering variety of requests for guidance, appeals for help, sharing of information and ideas, greetings and what not. He replied to all letters in his own handwriting so long as he could write. It was, thus, a peaceful yet active retirement.

Looking back, we see how from a poor beginning,

Dadabhai rose to national and international eminence. He was a philanthropist, a social reformer, a pioneer in women's education, and, above all, a great patriot. In veneration he was universally known as the 'Grand Old Man of India'.

Dadabhai's patriotism was born out of his spontaneous love for his motherland. It was a selfless love. He sacrificed his career and business for the sake of his country. For many years he had to leave his family unattended. His mother and his only son died when he was fighting the country's battles in distant England. His daughter's marriage had to be performed in his absence.

Dadabhai's methods for attaining freedom for his country were non-violent and constitutional. His fight was sophisticated and generated no bitterness. Even those he fought against gave him the utmost respect. They took no action against him even when he asked for Swaraj.

Dadabhai was responsible for the establishment of some 30 voluntary organizations in India and England, for the achievement of his objectives. He believed in perseverance and was undaunted by setbacks and reverses. The obstinacy of the British was well matched by Dadabhai's doggedness.

In grateful appreciation of his selfless service to the nation, the people of Bombay presented to Dadabhai, on July 3, 1869, an address and a purse of Rs. 30,000, which he donated to the East India Association. Though belated, the Bombay University conferred on him an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws in 1916.

Dadabhai's ceaseless struggle was bearing fruit. Administrative and political reforms, known as the

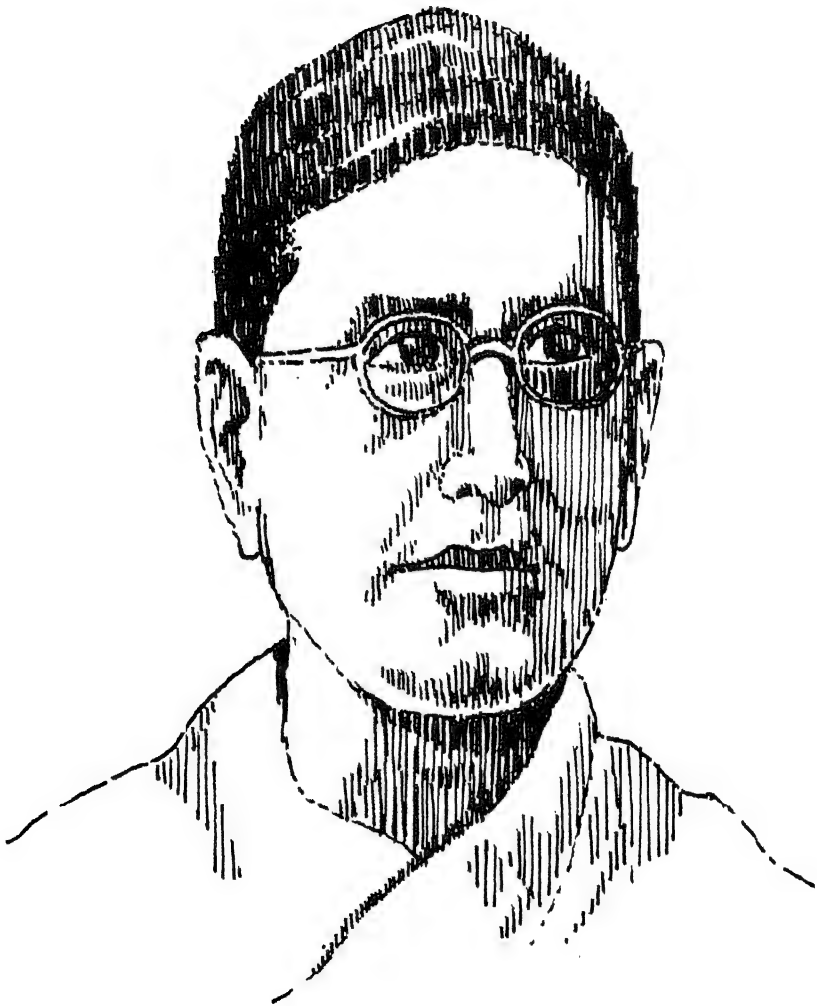
Minto-Morley Reforms (1909), were being drafted by the Government. Though disabled by age, he wrote personal letters, running into 90 pages, to Sir Morley and Lord Minto, suggesting additional reforms. Tragically, these reforms, granting to a considerable extent what Dadabhai had been fighting for, were announced about two months after his death on June 30, 1917.

Thus life's race well run, life's tasks well done, quietly disappeared from the Indian sky, that morning star which had risen 92 years earlier, always to be remembered, always to be respected by a grateful nation. Sixty years earlier he had taken up, on no one's bidding, a nation in deep stupor and left it fully awake, seething with a spirit of nationalism, aspiring for freedom. From here the torch of freedom was taken up by other able and beloved sons and daughters of India.

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# CHITTARANJAN DAS

Jagannath Mohanty



“...what is nationalism? It is, I conceive, a process through which a nation expresses itself and finds itself, not in isolation from other nations, but as part of a great scheme by which, in seeking its own expression and therefore its own identity, it materially assists the self-expression and self-realization of other nations as well. Diversity is as real as unity. And in order that the unity of the world may be established it is essential that each nationality should proceed on its own line and find fulfilment in self-expression and self-realization...I contend that each nationality constitutes a particular stream of the great unity, but no nation can fulfil itself unless and until it becomes itself and at the same time realizes its identity with humanity. The whole problem of nationalism is therefore to find that stream and to face that destiny. If you find the current and establish a continuity with the past, then the process of self-expression has begun, and nothing can stop the growth of nationality.”

Chittaranjan Das

# CHITTARANJAN DAS

Chittaranjan Das was born on November 5, 1870, in Calcutta. He hailed from a family of Vaidyas or physicians well known for their love of learning and progressive ideas.

His father, Bhuban Mohan Das, was a lawyer by profession and a journalist by preference. His mother, Nistarini Devi, was large-hearted and hospitable. Chittaranjan Das inherited all the good qualities from both the parents. He developed a logical mind, liberal outlook, and a deep sense of hospitality.

From his early childhood Chittaranjan Das was fond of patriotic poems and would recite them with great fervour. He entered school at the age of nine. He joined the Presidency College after school education. He did well in English, but fared badly in Mathematics. His great love for Bengali literature led him to read the writings of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore.

Chittaranjan Das showed ability for oratory, and became Secretary of the Students Association soon. The Association was addressed by many national leaders.

In 1890 Chittaranjan Das was sent to London to qualify for the Indian Civil Service. Although he did well in the I.C.S. examination, he was not selected, many believed, on account of his political activities.

Being patriotic, he evinced keen interest in using home-made goods. In England he involved himself in political activities. Once some English leaders made derogatory remarks about Indians in their speeches. The Indian students, who were studying there, criticized this. Chittaranjan Das played a leading role in the protest.

His father advised him to study for the Bar and to follow the family tradition. Chittaranjan Das, therefore, joined the Inner Temple in London. He became a barrister in 1893.

## **Lawyer**

In 1893, Chittaranjan Das started his career of a legal practitioner in the Calcutta High Court and had to struggle through many difficulties in the initial years. At that time his father became insolvent owing to his extravagant and generous nature. Chittaranjan Das had, therefore, to support a large family.

Chittaranjan Das became very famous, particularly in criminal cases. Equally, he established himself as a successful lawyer in civil cases.

He defended national workers including Bepin

Chandra Pal and Aravinda Ghose, who were great leaders of the country.

The case against Aravinda Ghose was known as the Alipore Bomb Conspiracy. It was a famous one, a part of the story of the Indian national struggle.

The Chief Presidency Magistrate of Calcutta, Mr. Kingsford, had become notorious for his award of severe sentences to nationalist workers and leaders. Once he sentenced a young boy of fifteen to severe whipping. This caused deep indignation throughout the country. The revolutionaries decided to kill Kingsford. A bomb was sent to him by post. He did not, however, open the parcel and escaped an accident.

A second attempt was made on his life after he was transferred from Calcutta to Muzaffarpur. Two young men, Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki, were sent to throw a bomb on him. The bomb hurled by them killed two innocent women instead. Khudiram was arrested at the Wani railway station on May 1, 1908. Prafulla was captured at the Mokama railway station. He killed himself with his own revolver. Khudiram was tried and sentenced to death.

The Government, however, wanted to expose those who were the brains behind the event. They arrested a number of revolutionaries including Aravinda Ghose. The activists were tried by Mr. Beachcroft, Additional Sessions Judge of Alipore. Public subscriptions were collected for their defence. The amount was soon spent, but nobody volunteered to defend them in court.

Although there were a number of accused, Aravinda Ghose was the Government's choice target.

Chittaranjan Das came forward to defend him. He devoted all his time and energy to acquit Aravinda Ghose. He not only fought without any fee, but also incurred heavy loss. By the time the case was over, he was in debt to the extent of about fifty thousand rupees! It was a huge amount at that time.

Chittaranjan Das put heart and soul in the defence of his client. The trial lasted for 126 days. Over two hundred witnesses were examined, 4,000 paper exhibits and about 500 material exhibits in the form of bombs and explosives were filed in the court. Chittaranjan Das's concluding address continued for nine days and ended with a very strong appeal. In the final submission, he quoted Aravinda Ghose: "If it is suggested that I preached the ideal of freedom for my country and that this is against the law, I plead guilty to the charge. If that is the law here, I say I have done that and I request you to convict me, but do not impute to me crimes I am not guilty of, deeds against which my whole nature revolts and which, having regard to my mental capacity, is something which could never have been perpetrated by me. If it is an offence to preach the ideal of freedom, I admit having done it..."

Chittaranjan Das added, "...My appeal to you is this: that long after this controversy will be hushed in silence, long after this turmoil, this agitation, will have ceased, long after he is dead and gone, he will be looked upon as the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of nationalism and a lover of humanity. Long after he is dead and gone, his words will be echoed and re-echoed not only in India but across distant seas and lands. Therefore I say that the man is not only standing before the Bar of this Court but

before the Bar of the High Court of history...”

Aravinda Ghose was acquitted and others’ death sentences were reduced to transporation.

The Chief Justice was highly impressed by Chittaranjan Das’s presentation of the case and his masterly handling of the intricate and massive evidence. He placed on record his high appreciation for Chittaranjan Das. With this case, Chittaranjan Das earned great repute as an eminent patriot and a talented lawyer.

One after another, Chittaranjan Das took up many cases, which made him famous all over India.

A noted case in which Chittaranjan Das saved five young men convicted of political crime is the Alipore Trunk Murder case of 1918. Five young revolutionaries had murdered one of their partners suspected of being a spy. The body was packed in a trunk and sent by a railway parcel. It decomposed in a few days and nobody took delivery of the parcel.

Chittaranjan Das was engaged by one of the accused as lawyer. But he defended all the accused. After 25 days’ sittings, all the accused were acquitted. The Advocate-General of Bengal complimented Chittaranjan Das for his skilful handling of the case.

The secret of his success lay in the extreme care, skill, courage, integrity and erudition with which he handled each case. His strong will and great sacrifice for several cases of political nature will be ever remembered by his countrymen.

When as a lawyer he was earning a huge fortune, Chittaranjan Das left the bar to devote himself to the freedom struggle.

## Man of letters

Chittaranjan Das was a poet. There are many literary works to his credit. His first book of poems was *Malancha*. It consists of lyrics of devotion and natural beauty. Some of the poems reflect his sympathy for the downtrodden people.

His other books are *Mala*, *Sagar Sangeet*, *Antaryami*, and *Kishore Kishori*. *Mala* consists of poems expressing religious spirit and devotion. *Sagar Sangeet* contains poems remarkable for novelty of content, beauty of thought and literary fervour. *Antaryami* and *Kishore Kishori* convey religious spirit, and the eternal love of Lord Krishna and Radha.

His deep concern for social and political problems of the time was expressed through journals. Chittaranjan Das published the well known Bengali monthly *Narayan*, which aimed at giving vent to the new ideas propagated through literature.

Chittaranjan Das was a founder member of the journal *Bande Mataram* and was on its editorial board. *Bande Mataram* was initially edited by Aravinda Ghose and later by Bepin Chandra Pal. Chittaranjan Das was the Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Forward*, a mouthpiece of the Swaraj Party. The journal set new standards in Indian journalism and had great influence on public opinion. Its forceful articles attracted the attention of the Government and people alike.

Chittaranjan Das and his young friends felt the need for a national system of education for producing true patriots. They desired to start a national college for the

purpose. But the Government of Bengal issued a circular banning students' participation in politics. Students were fined and even flogged by the headmasters at the instance of Inspectors.

Having collected handsome donations, Chittaranjan Das started a national college in 1905 with a view to upgrading it to a national university. Thus began the National Council of Education which subsequently developed into the Jadavpur Engineering College. At the request of Chittaranjan Das, Aravinda Ghose left his job as Vice-Principal of the Gaekwad College, Baroda, and joined this institution of national education as its first Principal.

### **As political leader**

Chittaranjan Das was a patriot first and then a lawyer, journalist and litterateur. Hence he could not keep himself aloof from politics for long. He brought with him great eloquence, persuasiveness, and a capacity for objective analysis of facts when he joined politics. In the beginning the Congress was only a petitioning body.

In 1905 the British Government announced the partition of Bengal. The official reason given for this action was administrative convenience. The people felt that the objective of partition was to cripple resurgent Bengal. The partition of Bengal shook the Congress out of its lethargy. It took many forceful resolutions. New forces acquired prominence in the Congress. Bepin Chandra Pal, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and others played important roles in politics. A Swadeshi Mandali was

formed at the residence of Chittaranjan Das in 1905 with an aim to promote the ideas of patriotism and self-help through Swadeshi.

In 1906 the Bengal Provincial Conference, anti-Government in nature, was held at Barisal. Chittaranjan Das drafted its main resolution advocating the policy of self-reliance. The conference could not complete the deliberations as its open session was broken up by the police. Volunteers and students were beaten up for shouting the slogan of 'Vande Mataram'. Many leaders were arrested and convicted.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak came to Calcutta and organized the Shivaji Festival. His slogan, "Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it" became the message of Indian nationalism. During the Calcutta session of the Congress in 1906, presided over by Dadabhai Naoroji, Tilak and some nationalists were Chittaranjan Das's guests.

After 1907 the Congress however remained under the control of the Moderates who were following the middle path. Chittaranjan Das kept himself aloof from active politics. But he rendered valuable service as a lawyer in many important political cases. In 1917 he presided over the Bengal Provincial Conference held in Calcutta. His name was proposed for Presidentship by Surendranath Banerjea. He declared that Chittaranjan Das would soon be one of India's most trusted and popular leaders.

## **Home Rule**

Mrs. Annie Besant, an English lady with sympathy for the Indian struggle for freedom, emerged as a most

powerful spokesman of self-government for India. She formed the Home Rule League which attracted many nationalists of the day. The Government banned her activities and she was soon interned. Chittaranjan Das whole-heartedly supported her views and joined the League. He also strongly criticized the Government's action.

He wanted that Mrs. Besant should preside over the next session of the Congress at Calcutta in 1917. This session is a landmark in the history of the freedom struggle as the Moderates gave way to the firebrands. The Home Rule League became the controlling authority of the Congress and Chittaranjan Das, one of its chief protagonists, emerged as a great political leader at the national level.

In 1919, the passing of the Rowlatt Act, an oppressive legislation, changed the course of Indian history. It gave the Government extraordinary powers of suppression of the political movement. It authorized arrest and detention of persons without trial. Mahatma Gandhi led a national agitation against the Bill and declared that the country should observe Satyagraha.

Chittaranjan Das was moved by this non-violent movement of resistance to the Government. He took it as a spiritual force and a time-honoured technique of peaceful resistance to the activities of the Government. In Punjab there was a strong protest movement against the Government which resorted to firing, arrests and lathicharge. A public meeting was held on April 13, 1919, in Jallianwala Bagh, a small park in Amritsar. The park was ranged by buildings on all sides. General Dyer, with

his British troops, entered the park and ordered firing at the people without giving any warning. There were many children, women and old men at the meeting. As a result of the firing, 1,000 died and 2,000 were wounded.

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre brought about a total change in the attitude of Indians towards the British Government. There was mass protest against this action throughout the country.

The Congress set up an independent enquiry committee under the chairmanship of Gandhiji. Chittaranjan Das, as one of its members, incurred heavy loss. He had to give up his practice for about four months and spent about fifty thousand rupees from his own pocket for his expenses as he was then living 'like a prince', in the words of Gandhiji.

Chittaranjan Das very skilfully analysed the evidence. He could not agree with Gandhiji on all points but, like a true democrat, accepted the decision of the majority. The committee was thus unanimous in their findings that brutal atrocities had been committed.

Jawaharlal Nehru, who was involved in the enquiry, recorded his impression about Chittaranjan Das thus: "This was the first occasion I had of working with him and under him. I valued that experience much and my admiration for him continually grew."

## **Reforms**

The Indian Reforms Act, popularly known as the Montford Reforms, was passed in 1919. Mr. Montagu was then the Secretary of State for India and

Mr. Chelmsford was the Viceroy. They prepared a report for progressive realization of a responsible government in India. Since the Government of India Act 1919 (or the India Reforms Act) was made on the basis of their report, it was known as the Montford Reforms. The Congress met at Amritsar within a few days of the passing of the Act. Motilal Nehru, a national leader and father of Jawaharlal Nehru, presided over the session. Many leading figures of the country also attended the Congress session.

## **Boycott**

Chittaranjan Das moved a resolution declaring the reforms “inadequate, unsatisfactory and disappointing”. It also appealed to the Government to take early steps for setting up a responsible government in India. The resolution was supported by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bepin Chandra Pal and it was accepted by the subject committee.

Gandhiji, however, objected to the above qualifying words and moved an amendment that the people should cooperate to work out the reforms in order to secure an early establishment of a fully responsible government. Finally, a compromise was reached and a resolution was adopted accordingly.

A sub-committee of the Congress was formed which recommended a boycott of educational institutions, law courts and legislative councils. Chittaranjan Das supported the boycott of the first two but urged that the legislature should not be boycotted.

Chittaranjan Das also declared that he would give up his practice. He hoped that struggle within the legislature would continue. The special Congress session held at Calcutta in 1920 however accepted the programme of boycott in full.

Gandhiji wanted that the Non-cooperation movement should start forthwith while Chittaranjan Das argued for implementing a five year long programme of preparation before launching such a movement. A resolution was drafted by Chittaranjan Das accordingly and was accepted by Gandhiji. It was also passed in the Congress session.

The resolution did not demand the boycott of Councils but declared that schools, colleges and law courts should be boycotted immediately. It also advised the people to withhold payment of taxes. Chittaranjan Das moved the resolution himself and announced that he would create enthusiasm for the boycott throughout the country.

When Chittaranjan Das renounced his practice, he was at the top of the legal profession in India. His huge income enabled him not only to live as a 'prince' but also to spend on all political and social matters as a 'samrat'.

After he gave up law, Chittaranjan Das's residence returned into a political institution. He devoted all his time and energy to political activities. He became Deshbandhu. He returned the briefs even in cases that he had already accepted. He handed over all his law books to his son-in-law. He did not even grant interviews to people who wanted to discuss legal matters with him.

A target period of one year was fixed for the attainment of Swaraj. Chittaranjan Das realized that the youth of the country needed to be inspired for this. He therefore

appealed to students of all colleges through meetings and writings.

A large number of students left their colleges and worked in villages and town for promoting the cause of Swaraj. Many students demanded the establishment of a national college. Chittaranjan Das decided to set up an institution to fulfil this demand. Mahatma Gandhi inaugurated the Bengal National College with Subhas Chandra Bose as its first Principal. Pandit Motilal Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and some other national leaders attended the inaugural function. Everyone congratulated Chittaranjan Das on his success in establishing the college.

Chittaranjan Das's example was emulated by others in establishing such national colleges and in giving up legal practice.

About 30,000 students left their schools and colleges and joined the Non-cooperation movement.

Chittaranjan Das went on extensive tours in and outside Bengal. The district authorities issued orders prohibiting him from entering their areas. In many places their arbitrary orders were resented and there were protest meetings in Calcutta and elsewhere.

## **Influence on Subhas**

Thousands of young men in India and abroad wrote to Chittaranjan Das offering their services for the nation. One of them was a young student in Cambridge—Subhas Chandra Bose.

In a long letter dated February 16, 1921, among other things, Subhas Chandra Bose wrote, "The wave of patriotism you have raised in India has reached the British as well. Here too the call of the motherland has been heard. A Madras student at Oxford has for the present suspended his studies. He is returning to India to begin his work there. In Cambridge nothing has yet been done, although there has been much discussion over non-cooperation.

"I believe if someone can show the way, there are others to follow him. For service and sacrifice on the altar of the motherland, you are the principal personality. I present myself to you with whatever little learning, intelligence, power and zeal I may possess. I have not much to dedicate at the feet of the motherland except my body and mind."

What confidence Subhas Chandra Bose placed in Chittaranjan Das and with what humility he surrendered himself to him for serving the motherland!

## **Family**

The Congress appealed to Government employees, whether soldiers or civilians, to leave their jobs if they could live without Congress assistance. The Government considered it sedition. They tried to suppress such action with a strong hand.

The country throbbed with a deep sense of urgency and enthusiasm. Chittaranjan Das played an important role in declaring November 17, 1920, as the date of real test, when the Prince of Wales would land in Bombay.

The vast majority of Hindus and Muslims decided to boycott the Prince's visit to Calcutta, too.

Chittaranjan Das tried his best to make such a boycott complete and peaceful. All schools, courts and shops were closed. The entire city presented a deserted look. The hartal in Calcutta was successful.

Chittaranjan Das organized a Congress Volunteer Corps for effectively implementing the Congress programmes. He enrolled one crore volunteers and collected one crore rupees for the Tilak Swaraj Memorial Fund. The volunteers were engaged in picketing Government offices, foreign goods, shops, liquor shops, and selling khaddar. All this led to an unprecedented mass awakening.

Thousands of volunteers were arrested by the Government and it was not possible to accommodate them in the jails. Basanti Devi, wife of Chittaranjan Das, and Urmila Devi, his sister, were also arrested on December 24, 1921. This arrest created an upheaval in the country. More than a thousand young men offered themselves for arrest. Muslims and Hindus joined the national movement in thousands.

There were stirrings among the police. As Basanti Devi and her companions were taken to prison, some police constables saluted her and promised to resign their jobs. Even factory workers joined as volunteers and offered themselves for arrest. The Government was disturbed by these developments and raised the wages of policemen to appease them.

On hearing about Basanti Devi's arrest, Chittaranjan Das was not worried. Rather, he was happy at this

evidence of boldness and spirit of sacrifice among the women of India. The Government, however, did not want to keep these ladies behind bars for long and soon released them.

Basanti Devi became busy in picketing with other volunteers. The policemen oppressed the innocent. But Basanti Devi and others continued their protest. Chittaranjan Das was asked to stop the volunteers. He said he could not stop them from discharging their duties.

One afternoon in December 1921 when Chittaranjan Das was taking his tea, he was arrested. He told his daughters that they must not send him any food from home. His daughters were, however, worried for he was accustomed to good food and would not relish jail food. But he declared he would take the same food as was served to his fellow prisoners.

Getting into the police car, Chittaranjan Das told the crowd, among other things, "Men and women of India, this is my message to you. Victory is in sight, if you are prepared to win it through suffering." Conches were blown and flowers showered on Deshbandhu as the police car started.

### **Life in prison**

Chittaranjan Das was first imprisoned in the Presidency Jail and then was moved to the Central Jail where there were many of his friends and followers. He was the President-elect of the Congress session held at Ahmedabad in 1921. Since he was in jail, his presidential

address was read out by Sarojini Naidu, and Hakim Ajmal Khan acted as the President in his absence.

After this session, Gandhiji proposed a mass Civil Disobedience movement at Bardoli, Gujarat. But he suspended it when some policemen were killed by a violent mob at Chauri Chaura in Gorakhpur district. He also directed all the Congress organizations to stop the activities of the volunteers and even suspended all meetings and processions.

Chittaranjan Das was very upset by this directive. Subhas Chandra Bose mentioned this: "Deshbandhu was beside himself with sorrow and anger at the way Mahatma was repeatedly bungling. The Bardoli retreat came as a staggering blow." Other leaders also felt unhappy about this.

## **Swaraj Party**

Chittaranjan Das advocated that the Congress should not boycott legislative councils but fight the Government in the councils. In 1923 the Swaraj Party was formed by Chittaranjan Das and Motilal Nehru for vigorously pursuing this policy. Gandhiji, for his part, realized, "The Parliamentary mentality has come to stay." The Swaraj Party was recognized as the Parliamentary wing of the Congress.

Motilal Nehru led the Swaraj Party in the Central Legislative Council. His was the largest single party in the Council, but he did not want to form a ministry. In Bengal, too, many candidates of the Swaraj Party won

the elections in 1924 and the Governor invited Chittaranjan Das to form a new ministry in Bengal. He declined.

The Swaraj Party came to be a powerful Opposition in the Bengal Legislative Council and inflicted repeated defeats upon the Government. Three ministries which were formed one after another were defeated.

### **Calcutta Corporation**

The Calcutta Municipal Act of 1923 was a major landmark in the history of local self-government in India. It made the Calcutta Corporation the largest municipality in the country. Swarajist candidates were elected to it in a majority. In 1924 Chittaranjan Das was elected its first Mayor and Subhas Chandra Bose was appointed as the Chief Executive Officer.

Chittaranjan Das laid down the following programme of work for the Corporation: Free primary education, free medical relief to the poor, pure and cheaper food and milk supply, supply of filtered water, housing for the poor, improved transport facilities, better sanitation in business and crowded areas, and so on. Greater efficiency was evident in the administration of the Corporation and many welfare projects were implemented.

Upon giving up his legal practice, from being one of the richest men in Calcutta, Chittaranjan Das became one of the poorest. He had a number of moral responsibilities. The only asset he had was his palatial building in Calcutta. Chittaranjan Das wanted to gift it to the nation. His entire

property was valued at Rs. 3,26,000 and his liabilities amounted to more than one lakh rupees. Chittaranjan Das decided that after clearing the liabilities, the balance should be utilized for providing education, building a temple and establishing an orphanage. He formed a Trust for handling this.

Mahatma Gandhi intervened in the matter and, in consultation with the trustees, created the Deshbandhu Memorial Fund which amounted to over Rs. 8,00,000. Chittaranjan Das's house was turned into a hospital for women. It was known as the Chittaranjan Seva Sadan. Now it is a magnificent medical institution for women.

### **Last days**

When Chittaranjan Das returned from the Belgaum Congress session in 1925, presided by Mahatma Gandhi, he was running a fever.

The struggle with the Government became more intense on account of the oppressive Bengal Ordinance. One Gopinath Shah murdered an Englishman, mistaking him for a high official. The Government of Bengal promulgated an ordinance. As a result some young persons were arrested on suspicion of a terrorist conspiracy. The number of arrests later on increased to hundreds.

On his return to Calcutta, Chittaranjan Das came to know that the ordinance was going to be legalized in the Council. Early on January 7, 1925, Chittaranjan Das declared from his sickbed, "The Black Bill is coming up

for discussion. I must attend at any cost and oppose it.”

He was taken to the Council on a stretcher, attended by two doctors. The Bill was defeated and Chittaranjan Das recovered from his physical and nervous debility. But not for long.

Suddenly on June 16, 1925, Chittaranjan Das, while taking rest at Darjeeling, fell seriously ill and died. Subhas Chandra Bose rightly said, “The death of Deshbandhu...was for India a national calamity of the first magnitude...”

His body was brought to Calcutta. Huge crowds gathered from far and near. All shops were closed. All vehicles stopped moving. Thousands came to express their grief and pay their respects to the departed leader.

There was a condolence meeting at Calcutta where Mahatma Gandhi was the only speaker. With much difficulty, controlling his emotions and breaking down once, he observed, “Deshbandhu was one of the greatest of men. I have had the privilege of knowing him intimately for the last six years...the closer I came to him, the more I came to love him. I saw during my brief stay at Darjeeling that no thought but that of the welfare of India occupied him. He dreamed and thought of freedom of India and of nothing else...”

# RASH BEHARI BOSE

Kiran Babal



“The growth of terrorist activity was deplorable but in the circumstances almost inevitable. Many Indians were pained and distressed by its activities. But the youth openly and more so privately applauded the patriotism, courage and daredevilry of the terrorists. Their exploits spread hatred of British rule and stiffened the will to be free.”

Tara Chand

# RASH BEHARI BOSE

It was a cold morning on December 23, 1912. People gathered excitedly by the roadside to watch the procession of Lord Hardinge, making his state entry. Standing in the crowd were a few persons who watched everything in silence. They were on an important mission. Tension mounted on their faces, but they kept their cool.

About 11.45 a.m., just as the procession reached near Dhulya Katra in Chandni Chowk, a bomb exploded with a cataclysmic sound. The crowd became unruly. People ran helter-skelter for their lives. Lord Hardinge, the Viceroy, escaped with some minor injuries, but the attendant occupying the right-hand seat at the back of the howdah was killed instantly. About 20 spectators were injured in the explosion.

Who masterminded the event? It was Rash Behari Bose, a famous revolutionary of his time.

Rash Behari's forefathers had settled in village Sabaldaha in the Burdwan district. His father's name was Vinod Behari and his mother's Bhuvaneshwari Devi.

Rash Behari was born on May 25, 1886, in Palara-Bighati (Hoogli) village. His mother passed away in 1889, when Rash Behari was still a baby. His maternal aunt, Vama Sundari, therefore, brought him up. His father remarried when Rash Behari was about four to five years old. At this stage the family shifted to Chandernagore.

Rash Behari's early education was at Subaldaha under the supervision of his grandfather, Kalicharan, and later on in Dupleix College at Chandernagore. In those days Chandernagore was under French rule. Therefore, young Rash Behari was brought up under the cultural influence of the British and the French. The French Revolution (1789) had a deep impact on the minds of young people like Rash Behari. Right from the beginning the path of the struggle for freedom was influenced by the revolution.

During his school days Rash Behari was not a very attentive student. He was a day-dreamer. His mind was agog with curiosity, preoccupied with revolutionary ideas. He was more anxious about his physical prowess than about study. In school he came in contact with a young revolutionary, Shirish Chandra Ghosh. The two became good friends. Somehow the boys believed that, if they could master black magic, they could get their country freed. Day in and day out the two boys worked on this line. But before they could get into any trouble, people came to know of their belief and saved them from the madness they were heading for.

Once Rash Behari visited his father at Calcutta. There he felt gravely insulted when he came to know that Bengalis were refused entry in the army. He tried to enter the army under a false name. Very soon he was detected,

beaten and was locked up for some time. His father sent him back to Chandernagore.

As luck would have it, Rash Behari got hold of a well-known revolutionary book *Ananda Math*. This novel was written by the noted Bengali novelist and thinker, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee who composed the song 'Vande Mataram'. It was not written as a part of the novel, but was later included in it. *Ananda Math* and 'Vande Mataram' played a very significant role in the history of the freedom movement of India. 'Vande Mataram' triggered the revolutionary movement in Bengal. It was a slogan which was taken up not only by the Bengal revolutionaries but by the whole of India. 'Vande Mataram' is a long poem. It has been recognized as the national song of India. By reading *Ananda Math* Rash Behari came to know of numerous rural revolutionaries.

Rash Behari also read the famous Bengali poet, Navin Sen's *Palasir Yudha*, a collection of patriotic poems. In course of time he read other revolutionary books. He read the nationalistic speeches of the great orator and revolutionary, Surendranath Banerjea. Surrounded all the time by such an atmosphere, Rash Behari began to mature as a young rebel. In Chandernagore, his teacher, Charu Chandra, a man of radical ideas, inspired Rash Behari. The speeches of Swami Vivekananda also helped him to think along nationalistic lines.

## Employment

Rash Behari did not get a chance to complete college as his maternal uncle got him a job at Fort William.

Education among the middle classes was but a means to get a job.

Rash Behari's father was employed in the Government press at Shimla. He wanted Rash Behari to get a Government job. So, Rash Behari went to Shimla and was appointed a copy-holder in the Government press. There he mastered English and typewriting. After some time he went to Kasauli and worked at the Pasteur Institute. Rash Behari was not happy with these jobs. His mind was always wandering to pastures new.

## **Patriotism**

On a colleague's advice, Rash Behari went to Dehra Dun as a guardian tutor in the house of Pramatha Nath Tagore. Rash Behari's father used some of his influence and got him a clerical post at the Dehra Dun Forest Research Institute. By and by, through hard work, Rash Behari became a head-clerk. Though he was a Government employee, in his heart of hearts he cherished the feelings of a patriot and rebel.

Under the British rule the country was not moving forward. Progress was hampered. Repressive measures increased the number of revolutionaries. The events which followed had a direct effect on Rash Behari. They helped to draw him closer to other revolutionaries.

The Government practised the policy of divide and rule. Secretly the partition of Bengal had been decided upon somewhere in the beginning of the century. By 1903 it was known that Bengal was going to be divided. As soon as this news leaked out, agitation began on all fronts.

In the beginning it was supported by Muslim leaders. Later the British Government reached an agreement with the Muslim leader, the Nawab of Dhaka. The agreement was not really political. The Nawab of Dhaka was up to his ears in debt, near bankruptcy. At this juncture the British Government advanced him a loan and saved him from bankruptcy. The Nawab of Dhaka immediately changed his stand on the partition and said that it was in the interest of Muslims. A communal complexion was thus given to the whole movement.

The British were successful in dividing the public opinion, by bringing the upper class Muslims to their side. Emboldened by this success, Lord Curzon, the Viceroy, said in a mood of triumph, "Bengal partition is a settled fact."

But Surendranath Banerjea, who was at that time the most popular leader of Bengal, said, "I shall unsettle the settled fact."

Lord Curzon ignored this and on October 16, 1905, he announced the splitting of Bengal. People reacted sharply and violently.

Rabindranath Tagore, the renowned poet of Bengal, gave the slogan:

*"Bhai Bhai ek thain  
Bhed nai bhed nai "*

(Brothers would remain united and there is no difference between them.) This couplet reverberated through the length and breadth of Bengal.

This was supplemented with a new orientation of the festival of 'Raksha Bandhan'. Everyone opposed the partition and tied a 'rakhi' on the wrist of another patriot.

From this emerged another great idea, boycott of foreign goods and use of 'Swadeshi' or Indian goods, which became a major plank of the national movement. So much so that the whole campaign came to be known as the 'Swadeshi Movement'.

People showed their resentment through their writings in various journals as well. One of the lesser known persons and a disciple of Swami Vivekananda was a sanyasi named Brahama Bandhav Upadhyaya. His real name was Bhawani Charan Banerji. Upadhyaya was much moved by the partition of Bengal and through his paper *Sandhya* (Evening), he began to preach patriotism. He said, "There is no power on earth which can confine me in jail." He proved the truth of this statement. When he was prosecuted for his articles, he died in the jail hospital.

Along with *Sandhya*, the *Jugantar* also enthused the people of Bengal. It started publication in March 1906. Bhupendra Nath Dutt, the younger brother of Swami Vivekananda, was the man behind this paper.

In the same year, Aravinda Ghose started his paper, *Bande Mataram*, in August. His call to the Indian people—"We want absolute autonomy free from British control"—greatly imbued them with nationalistic feelings.

## **Secret societies**

Revolutionaries like Khudiram Bose emerged out of this unrest in Bengal. The Alipore Conspiracy case had created a political furore.

Aravinda Ghose and his brother, Barindra Kumar Ghose, came to the forefront at this time. Aravinda had appeared in the I.C.S. examination in England and done very well. But he failed in horse riding. After returning from England Aravinda was employed as a professor in Baroda. Barindra was sent to Bengal to form secret revolutionary societies.

Khudiram was a member of one such society. The Chief Presidency Magistrate, Kingsford, had become notorious for his cruelty. He went out of his way to give severe punishments to the revolutionaries. Some persons who had merely raised the slogan 'Vande Mataram', were flogged under his orders.

The revolutionaries wanted to kill Kingsford. The police got to know of this plan. The Magistrate was transferred to a remote place.

Barindra Kumar sent Khudiram, along with some other young men, to throw a bomb at the Magistrate. Khudiram spotted the carriage but that day instead of the Magistrate it carried some European ladies. The ladies were killed by the bomb. Aravinda Ghose, Barindra, Khudiram and others were arrested in what came to be called the Alipore Conspiracy case. Khudiram was sentenced to death. He was hanged on August 11, 1908. He faced the gallows bravely. This attracted Lokamanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak's attention. He wrote articles in his paper, *Kesari*, praising Khudiram. The news of the event spread like fire and Khudiram became a household name in Bengal. Lokamanya was sent to jail for these articles.

Rash Behari was very affected by all this. In fact, Lokamanya Tilak was among those who influenced and

moulded his mind, and drew him to the path of freedom struggle.

## **Turning point**

The story of Khudiram served as a turning point in Rash Behari's life. It gradually became clear to him that the Government would not yield without revolutionary action on the part of the patriots. He decided to do something along the lines of the work of Khudiram to awaken patriotic feelings among the people. He started gearing up his revolutionary activities under the guidance of one Jatin Banerjee, an eminent revolutionary leader.

The youth in India became more and more restless. They started organizing secret societies. Often, these societies were not very clear about what they had to do. What was clear was only that the British must be turned out of the country. Many local organizations sprang up and young men joined them. Some were sent to Delhi to be trained under notable revolutionary leaders like Master Amir Chand, Avadh Bihari and Bal Mukund.

Rash Behari made Benares one of his headquarters. Propaganda among Indian soldiers was taken up with a view to including them in the general rebellion planned all over northern India. Contacts were established with Indian soldiers from Dinapore to Jalandhar cantonment. The plan was that on a fixed night the Indian sepoy would attack the English soldiers. At the same time all telegraph wires would be cut, the treasury looted and prisoners released. Having done all this, the

revolutionaries were to meet in Lahore. February 21, 1915, was fixed as the date of this simultaneous uprising all over India.

But one Kirpal Singh, a spy who managed to enrol himself as a member of Rash Behari's party, secretly communicated the date to the police. As soon as this was known, the date was changed to February 19. Kirpal Singh was under strict vigilance but he managed to send word to the police about the change of date. The Government immediately swooped down on the suspects and made a number of arrests. Rash Behari managed to escape and return safely to Benares.

The British Government decided to shift its capital from Calcutta to Delhi. When Rash Behari came to know about this, he was very happy. He thought it to be the right moment to strike and make the Government realize that Indians would not be cowed down and they would not rest till they attained complete freedom. Rash Behari and his comrades, along with a Delhi group of revolutionaries, planned something spectacular during the Viceroy's visit, as we have seen earlier.

### **Conspiracy cases**

In 1913 the Government passed the Indian Criminal Law Amendment Act. Among other conspiracy cases tried under this Act, the most important was the Delhi Conspiracy case. A number of people were put on trial for planning the murder of Lord Hardinge. Four of the accused were Master Amir Chand, Avadh Behari, Bal Mukund and Basanta Viswas.

Master Amir Chand, Avadh Behari and Bal Mukund were hanged in Delhi jail. The Maulana Azad Medical College is situated at the site of the old jail. The portion of the jail where the hanging took place is preserved and every year in the month of May people gather there to pay homage to the martyrs.

Basanta Viswas was hanged in Ambala jail. It was he who, disguised as a lady, had thrown the bomb. Rash Behari escaped because of a clever disguise.

Sir Valentine Chirol, in his book *Indian Unrest*, writes about the event, "The throwing of a bomb on a Viceroy during his state entry into the new capital of Delhi had tremendous effect on the subsequent revolutionary upheavals which shook India. The detonation started by Rash Behari Bose did never die away. It was he who planned the second sepoy mutiny which, if it succeeded, would have shattered the British Empire in India."

Vasudha Chakravorty, a famous writer, wrote, "Who put it into the head of Rash Behari Bose to think and act like that? The impelling force of history was silently but inexorably at work. Freedom from foreign rule had already in the beginning of this century become an objective necessity for India. The blow that struck at British imperialism on the streets of Delhi apparently blew over, but the bomb reverberated through the corridors of time into the portals of history."

There was a massive hunt for Rash Behari but he ever managed to escape. He was an expert in changing guises. He had at a time at least four hideouts in the city where he happened to live. Even his companions did not know where he spent the nights.

Sir Charles, a famous police officer dealing with revolutionaries, wrote, "Expert in make-up, Rash Behari could dress himself up either as a Punjabi or as a Gujarati or an old Maharashtrian in such a perfect manner that it was impossible to suspect him as one in disguise. He would have been a great stage actor instead of revolutionary if he so desired."

Due to hot pursuit by the Government, Rash Behari was always on the move. He started travelling in disguise in Punjab, U.P. and Bengal.

The first world war had started and the Indian revolutionaries arranged German help to organize a rising in India. During the first decade of the 20th century, hundreds of Indians had migrated to the U.S.A. and other countries for a better living. When they left India they were not motivated by any revolutionary ideas. Within a few years these simple men became rich and they realized that although they were worked as hard or harder than the natives of those countries, they did not command much respect because they came from a country which was under foreign rule. Thus, their perceptions changed.

Lala Hardayal, Professor Barkatullah, Tarak Nath Das, all eminent scholars, began to sow the seeds of patriotism among the Indians settled outside India. Thus the Ghadar Party was born in the U.S.A., in 1913. Many members of this party later on became famous as patriots. At a later stage some 8,000 members of the Ghadar Party came to India openly or stealthily to bring about a revolution.

Rash Behari and Sachin Sanyal, a close associate and revolutionary, came in contact with this society. A Maharashtrian young man, Pingley, reached Calcutta with

Satyen Sen, carrying news of German aid. Pingley was to assist Rash Behari at Benares. Rash Behari, Pingley and the Ghadar Party were working to bring about an armed uprising. Sachin Sanyal joined them.

Sachin Sanyal was Rash Behari's right-hand man. His centre of work was Benares. Later, Sachin Sanyal was arrested and awarded transportation for life in the Benares Conspiracy case. After his release from the Andamans, he came back to his old place. For some time he remained quiet because Gandhiji had started the Non-cooperation movement in 1921. But after the Non-cooperation movement the revolutionaries once more came into the field, and Sachin Sanyal emerged as a great leader of the revolutionaries. He formed the Hindustan Republican Association, which was later renamed Hindustan Socialist Republican Association by Bhagat Singh.

Jatin Mukherjee, leader of the Jugantar Party, requested Rash Behari to activate the revolutionary movement in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. During this period Rash Behari had many miraculous escapes in Lahore, Amritsar and Benares.

In March 1915, Pingley was arrested in Meerut cantonment with some bombs and was executed. Rash Behari then decided to leave India for Japan. He went to Benares and stayed with Swami Vidyanand of *Sandhya* in a math. His old friends were his main supporters.

## **In Japan**

Rash Behari left Calcutta on May 12, 1915. He went to Japan as Raja P.N.T. Tagore, a distant relative of

Rabindranath Tagore who was to go to Japan soon. Rash Behari managed to convince the police that he was going to organize the tour.

Some writers say that Rabindranath Tagore was aware of this impersonation. They advance the reason that when Tagore visited Japan a second time, Rash Behari really tried to make his visit a success. In the meantime he had become a great figure in Japan. His writings had established him as a representative of Indian renaissance.

Rash Behari had reached Singapore on May 22, 1915, and from there he reached Tokyo in June. From June 1915 to June 1918, Rash Behari was almost like a runaway inside Japan. As a struggling revolutionary in Japan he had to change his residence seventeen times till he became a recognized citizen of Japan. During this period Rash Behari met Herambalal Gupta and Bhagwan Singh of the Ghadar Party. Japan was Britain's ally in the war. So Britain tried for the extradition of Herambalal and Rash Behari.

Lord Hardinge, in one of his despatches, said, "The most dangerous of them is Rash Behari Bose who has now escaped to Japan. His Majesty's Government should bring pressure on the Foreign Ministry of the Japanese Government for immediate extradition of this arch enemy of the Indian empire who planned an armed revolt among the rank and file of the Army."

Pressure by the British Government increased. Herambalal and Rash Behari were ordered to quit Japan, but the Black Dragon Party of Japan came to their rescue and gave them protection. They remained concealed in Japan. Herambalal, at great risk, escaped on a Mexican

ship to the U.S.A. Rash Behari ended this hide and seek by becoming a Japanese citizen. The family of Mr. and Mrs. Soma was sympathetic towards his aspirations for India. They persuaded their daughter, Tosiko, to marry the Indian patriot. Rash Behari married Tosiko in 1918.

After marriage, life was not easy for Rash Behari and Tosiko. They had to go through a lot of difficulties. Tosiko gave birth to a boy, Masahide, and a girl, Tetaku. Rash Behari learnt Japanese and became a journalist as well as a writer in Japanese. He took part in many cultural affairs and wrote many books in Japanese, explaining Indian viewpoints.

Tosiko died in March 1925, at the age of 28. The children were brought up by their grandparents.

Rash Behari wrote a letter to his sister, Sushila, on January 27, 1934, in which he said, "...I am glad that you got the money. My financial position is not so good and so I could not send more money... I am unhappy to know that Mashi-Ma is not well. Please write about her and give my 'pranams' to her. Please look after her and don't leave the spinning wheel..."

With every breath of his life, Rash Behari served the cause of his motherland's freedom from the Britishers.

As a revolutionary, Rash Behari was not in love with the spinning wheel, but he asked his sister to stick to it.

Rash Behari never ceased to work. Mainly due to his efforts, a conference was held in Tokyo from March 28 to 30, 1942, for discussions on political issues. At the conference held in Bangkok from June 15 to 23, 1942, Rash Behari was elected as Chairman. He hoisted the tricolour and inaugurated the Indian Independence

League (IIL). The object was to attain full independence for India.

## **Indian National Army**

Rash Behari gained political prominence during the second world war. When Japan declared war, Rash Behari, helped by Captain Mohan Singh and Sardar Pritam Singh, formed the Indian National Army, travelling extensively in the Far East which was conquered by Japan.

On September 1, 1942, the I.N.A. was formally established and Rash Behari was elected President. As Japanese conquests extended up to Burma, the I.N.A. grew in importance, getting war prisoners as recruits.

Unfortunately its progress was hampered by internal disputes and the I.N.A. became inactive for some time.

Subhas Chandra Bose arrived in Singapore on July 2, 1943. He assumed Supreme Command of the I.N.A.. on August 25.

Subhas Chandra Bose was a great Indian leader. He had admiration and sympathy for the revolutionary parties that worked for our freedom. He was a very important Congress leader. He became the President of the Congress at Haripura in 1938. Soon differences cropped up between Gandhiji and Subhas Chandra Bose. In spite of Gandhiji's reservations, Subhas Chandra Bose contested for the Congress presidentship for a second term. He was elected and he presided over the Tripuri Congress in 1939. Gandhiji did not favour a second term for Subhas Chandra Bose. Circumstances arose in which he had to

esign as President. He left the Congress, and formed the Forward Bloc.

After a period of intense political activity, in January 1941, Subhas Chandra Bose secretly left India.

Rash Behari Bose was highly relieved to have Subhas Chandra Bose by his side at the time when I.N.A. was facing an internal crisis.

Rash Behari expired before the end of the war, on January 21, 1945, when Japan was collapsing. He died in his sleep. Subhas Chandra Bose paid a long tribute to him extolling his patriotism and revolutionary work.

Rash Behari's life divides itself into three parts. The first 20 years of his life, that is 1886 to 1906, were spent in Bengal. The years from 1907 to 1915, up to his escape to Japan, were spent in northern India. After that he went away to Japan and lived there until his death.

Rash Behari had a dominating personality. He was a nationalist but believed in international co-operation as was apparent during the two world wars. In social matters he was a liberal. In India he led an austere but unconventional life. He was calm in temperament.

His role in the Indian revolutionary movement is almost unique. He started his political career from Chandernagore and Calcutta. While in Dehra Dun and Punjab, he worked with the local people enjoying their full confidence. He was above regionalism. His remarkable organizing talent was evident in the Lord Hardinge bomb case as well as during the second world war when he formed the I.N.A. He will be remembered as a great hero of the Indian revolutionary movement.

# S. SATYAMURTI

K. R. Vaidyanathan



“When once people make up their minds to attain their freedom, there is no power on earth which can stand in their way.”

S. Satyamurti

## S. SATYAMURTI

The year was 1910. A young man of twenty-three wrote an essay for a competition held by the Imperial League. The subject was 'Loyalty to the British Raj'. It won him a gold medal. He had not indulged in any flattery of the British rulers to win the prize. Instead, he ably argued that loyalty was a two-way affair, a matter of give and take. He thus proved his talent for debate quite young.

This was S. Satyamurti who later became one of the most articulate opponents of the British Raj. He rose to such fame as a fiery orator, debater and brilliant parliamentarian that Mahatma Gandhi once said of him, "It is enough if one Satyamurti is sent to the legislature." He also added, "If there had been ten Satyamurtis in our legislatures, the British would have quit long ago."

Strangely, the same Satyamurti who won the prize, failed in his matriculation examination which he had written seven years earlier, in 1903. He was just sixteen then. However, the failure proved to be a stepping stone

to success, as the saying goes. The following year Satyamurti passed the examination creditably and went on to complete his college education.

He joined the Christian College, Madras, in 1906 for his Bachelor of Arts Course. He was one of the most brilliant students of the college and secured a first class in English and a high second class in Sanskrit and History.

After his B.A. he joined the Law College, Madras. Here too he passed with distinction. So much so the then Principal of the Law College desired his pupil to become a lecturer in the same college. Satyamurti, however, opted to work in a wider world rather than confine himself within the four walls of a classroom.

He enrolled himself as a High Court Vakil in 1913. It was then that he came in close contact with the veteran Congress leader and leading lawyer, S. Srinivasa Iyengar. He was so impressed by Satyamurti's oratory and debating capabilities that he initiated him into politics. Around 1915 Satyamurti gave up law to devote himself wholly to politics and public affairs. From then on he never looked back.

### **Three predictions**

Soon after Satyamurti's birth on August 19, 1887, in Tirumayyam village, in the principality of Pudukottai, now part of Tamil Nadu, his father, an amateur astrologer, studied the child's stars and made three predictions: He would become a famous orator, he would carry his fame 'across the seas' and he would perform the *shraddha*

(periodic rites for dead relatives) of his father at Gaya. All these predictions did come true.

When Satyamurti was but nine, his father, Sundara Sastriar, an orthodox brahmin, scholar, and a pleader by profession, died, leaving behind his wife, children and aged parents to fend for themselves. Satyamurti was the eldest of five sons and one of the nine children. It fell to his and his mother's lot to bring up the family.

While he diligently pursued his studies he could not be oblivious to the happenings in the country. This is how he described his formative and impressionable college years: "We had exciting times. Mr. Bepin Chandra Pal visited Madras and we, students, got thoroughly excited. We attended all his lectures. Lala Lajpat Rai was deported and we boycotted classes."

### **Stirring events**

Even as a pre-graduate course student in Pudukottai itself, there were many stirring events which drew young men like Satyamurti towards the public forum. The partition of Bengal on October 16, 1905, created much anger in the country. Both Hindus and Muslims saw in it the British policy of 'divide and rule' in action and strongly opposed it. Young Satyamurti could not remain silent. He organized a meeting of students to protest against the tyranny of the British.

The Bengal partition marked the beginning of the Swadeshi movement and the boycott of British goods. It is interesting to recall how every section of people reacted. The celebrated historian, Dr. R. C. Majumdar

writes: "The cobblers in Mymensingh refused to mend English shoes. The Oriya cooks and servants declared that they would not serve masters using foreign goods. The washermen of Kalighat passed a resolution boycotting the washing of foreign clothes. A young girl of six refused to take foreign medicine even when she was seriously ill. The students refused to appear in the examinations on the ground that the answer books were made of foreign paper."

The first decade of the twentieth century saw the advent of the railway network in India. This and the post and telegraph system linked the main centres to each other. These advances in communication led to the development of newspapers all over the country, stirring the minds of educated people.

The introduction of English education and the ideas of the nineteenth century liberal philosophers took India from the Medieval Age to the Modern Age. This modern Indian renaissance helped the nation to wake up from a deep slumber. It led to a great awakening which touched every aspect of our national life—religious, social, cultural, literary, and, above all, political. As Dr. Majumdar has put it, "English education broke the barrier which had hitherto shut India from the outside world and opened the floodgate of ideas."

While English education awakened the elite, the masses were roused through the medium of popular songs or ballads. Many sensational events like the arrest of Lala Lajpat Rai and the trial and sentence of Bal Gangadhar Tilak were narrated in lilting tunes, which inspired people. It is interesting to note in this context that at the Congress

session held at Benares in 1905, presided by Gopal Krishna Gokhale, 'Jana Gana Mana', our national anthem, was sung by the author, Rabindranath Tagore, himself.

## **Gandhiji's influence**

The most important event in the history of the Congress which influenced the youth was the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi as its peerless leader in 1919. This was the year of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, when the patriots in Punjab had their first baptism of bloodshed.

The year 1920 was significant as the year of the Nagpur session of the Congress, presided over by C. Vijayaraghavachariar, which saw the birth of the non-violent Non-cooperation movement on a mass scale and the epic Flag Satyagraha.

Needless to say, Satyamurti, like many others of his generation, felt the powerful attraction of Mahatma Gandhi.

Satyamurti also became one of the ardent followers of C. R. Das. Das had visited Madras in 1917 to canvass support of Congressmen in the South to the Council entry programme. As Satyamurti earlier wrote: "C.R. Das came to Madras as a leader of a new school of thought in the Indian National Congress... He succeeded in raising the people of Madras from the quagmire of metaphysics and slough of despondency into which they had fallen or had been thrown in and gave them a breath of fresh air of the mountains of real nationalism and real work for Swaraj."

## Call of the Congress

*Sons of Ind, why sit ye idle,  
Wait ye for some Dera's aid?  
Buckle to, be up and doing!  
Nations by themselves are made!*

This clarion call to the sons of India to get to work came not from an Indian leader, but A.O. Hume, a Britisher. It was he who set the Congress movement in motion.

Hume addressed his first letter in 1883 to the graduates of the Calcutta University to form an organization “for the mental, moral, social and political regeneration of the people of India”, and this led to the founding of the Congress in Bombay in 1885.

The up-and-coming generation of Satyamurti was brought up in such an emotionally charged atmosphere. To them the call of the Congress was irresistible. No wonder, as early as 1908, when Satyamurti was just 21, and still in college, he served as a volunteer during the Madras session of the Congress presided over by Rash Behari Ghose. His talents as a public speaker came to light then and he was encouraged to take an active interest in subsequent sessions.

In 1914, when the Congress met again at Madras under the presidency of Bhupendra Nath Basu, Satyamurti headed one of the sub-committees. In the intervening years he kept himself engaged in studying various issues of public interest and commenting on them through letters and articles in the press. He wrote a critical piece on Annie Besant's Home Rule Movement.

Satyamurti made his real debut as an orator and debater at the Provincial Political Conference held at Kancheepuram in May 1918. The conference was presided over by Sarojini Naidu. Annie Besant moved a resolution calling upon men to enlist themselves in the defence forces and help the British in the first world war.

Satyamurti opposed the resolution in a forceful speech. Though he did not carry the day, 'he made a very fine impression on his hearers', as the editor of the *Daily Gazette* of Karachi observed.

Sarojini Naidu herself remarked that Satyamurti could be classed among the best models for parliamentary oratory. No small tribute this. Within one year, in April 1919, Satyamurti was invited to join the Congress deputation which was leaving for England to place the nationalist view on the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms proposals before the British Government and public. The delegation was headed by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya.

### **“Across the seas”**

Satyamurti had but about a day to make up his mind when the telegram came from Bombay asking him to join the delegation. “Without a moment’s hesitation I decided to join,” said Satyamurti. That was typical of his response to the call of the Congress all his life.

This was Satyamurti’s first trip abroad, thus fulfilling his father’s prediction that he would carry his fame across the seas. He was to return to India after a few weeks. But

he was asked to stay back and carry on intensive propaganda for the Congress so as to remove any misapprehension among the British about India and create a better understanding between the two countries. This Satyamurti did by addressing numerous public meetings and making valuable contacts with leading British politicians. Ultimately his stay in England extended to six months.

That his long stay in England was fruitful is evident from a letter addressed to him by the Scottish Independent Party. It read: "Your eloquent appeals delivered to the many huge meetings addressed in the country have made a powerful impression, and in your absence, we will carry on the work of fighting for justice to the Indian people."

Back home, a warm welcome awaited Satyamurti. In his own words, "This made me resolve not to go back to my profession at all, but to do Congress propaganda work in the country." Indeed, Satyamurti considered political work his life's mission and to the end he lived up to it. In fact, he once remarked to Gandhiji, "Life without political work appears a very dreary thing to me."

It is not difficult to imagine how, to a young man of 34, professional career was indispensable for his family's survival. But to Satyamurti, the aim in life was clear. He said, "I have deliberately chosen a life of strenuous public work and comparative poverty in order to serve my motherland."

When Mahatma Gandhi started his Non-cooperation movement, Satyamurti did not join it. He made it clear that he was patriotic enough to stick to the Congress, though he could not respond to Gandhiji's call. By

suspending his practice he did answer, to an extent, Gandhiji's call to boycott the courts. However, he did not give up his membership of the Madras University as he wanted to take an active part in the University's affairs and maintain his rapport with the student community.

Satyamurti was against any ban on council entry, which a section of leaders advocated. He felt that council entry would, in fact, further the Non-cooperation movement from within the councils. It was actually "carrying the fight into the enemy's fortress and fighting him on his own ground", he said. In support of his argument he cited the example of the Irish leaders, Charles Stewart Parnell and Eamon De Valera who had entered the British Parliament with a similar objective.

In 1923 Satyamurti became a member of the Madras Legislative Council. He sought election from the University Constituency. His reason: "This is the only electorate which consists of all classes and creeds among the people of the Presidency namely, the Andhras, the Tamils, the Malayalees, the Canarese, the Hindus, the Mussalmans and the Christians...I shall be occupying a unique position there as being entitled to voice the educated opinion of the whole Presidency."

Satyamurti's election appeal read: "Ever since my political birth, I have been a Congressman and I will continue to be so. I recognise the Indian National Congress as the work of the best brains and best hearts of India for the last 40 years. And, it is the duty of every patriotic Indian to strengthen this great national institution in order that it may achieve its cherished object of Swaraj for India."

Even Annie Besant, whom Satyamurti had opposed, printed his appeal as a supplement to her paper, *New India*. She also sent out a letter recommending him as the best candidate from this (University) constituency.

Satyamurti won handsomely and his victory was hailed by many political leaders. From the very first day his voice rose above others and reverberated in the Council Hall. During his three-year tenure he took part in every discussion of importance and tabled over 7000 questions with innumerable supplementaries.

The Justice Party was in power in those days. The then Governor of Madras, Lord Willingdon, pitted the Justice Party against the Congress and asked the leader of the Party to form the ministry. Accordingly, the Raja of Panagal, formed the ministry. But the new ministry drew criticism as it was composed deliberately on communal lines.

C. Ramalinga Reddy, another famous orator, moved a non-confidence motion. On November 27, 1923, Satyamurti delivered his maiden speech supporting the motion. The speech was rousing and expressive and was greeted with loud cheers. "The House had never heard anything so eloquent or stirring before," R.V. Krishna Iyer, the Assistant Secretary of the Council, commented.

## **Eloquence**

Satyamurti's greatness did not rest merely on his oratory but on his deep study, factual knowledge and, above all, on his ability and manner of convincing

presentation. He marshalled strong arguments and used quotations to prove his point. One of his longest speeches was with reference to the humiliations of Indians in the colonies. In this he quoted V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, C.F. Andrews, Winston Churchill, Shakespeare, the *Mahabharata*, and Sanskrit verses in support of his arguments.

A typical quote he was fond of using was 'not that I love the Empire less, but I love India more'.

Satyamurti was a terror to the members of the Treasury Bench. It is said that Ministers and Members of Parliament would come to the Council every day fearing Satyamurti's witticisms. Once, referring to the Chief Minister's silence on being put a question, Satyamurti said, "I ask whether the significant silence can be reconciled with any ordinary standards of political honesty or decency."

## **Radical views**

Satyamurti held enlightened views on communal representation in Government services. He said, "After all, we have got to live in this country, we have got to live as friends and as brothers... I want that all communities, Brahmins, Non-Brahmins, Hindus, Mussalmans, Christians and Depressed Classes must join together in one mighty battle for winning Swaraj."

One of Satyamurti's greatest parliamentary feats was when, on October 8, 1927, he initiated in the Madras Council, an adjournment motion on the seizure by the

Madras Police of Subramania Bharati's songs. The matter was *sub judice*, with an application filed in the Madras High Court. It was, therefore, a prolonged struggle even to get the motion admitted.

Satyamurti pointed out that had Bharati been born in a free country he would have been made a Poet Laureate. But in a slave country like India he had to live in exile and become a wreck. He said that as long as the Tamil language existed and so long as a single Tamilian lived, Bharati's songs would remain the priceless heritage of the Tamil race.

### **In Central Assembly**

The year 1934 saw the holding of general elections to the Central Legislature. The Congress participated for the first time. Satyamurti was the obvious choice from the prestigious Madras City constituency. He had to face A.. Ramaswami Mudaliar, the Justice Party candidate, a great spokesman and orator. Both attracted huge audiences. But it was an essentially civilized campaign. The story goes that the two candidates sometimes met while canvassing in the city and shook hands. When some of Satyamurti's fans saw this they protested. But Satyamurti laughed it off as a joke. "Actually I was feeling his pulse," he remarked once.

On one occasion both the candidates appeared together on the same platform provided by the Anglo-Indian Association. The president, E.H.M. Brower, introduced the speakers as distinguished gentlemen holding opposite

views on many subjects. He complimented them for their courage and enterprise in participating in this face-to-face debate.

Satyamurti won by a margin of more than five thousand votes. He came out of the Ripon Buildings to loud cheers by the waiting crowd. Thanking his supporters he said, "The success you are celebrating this evening is not mine. It is the success of the Congress, of Mahatma Gandhi and of Bharat Mata."

As Hilton Brown, a former ICS officer, aptly commented, "The Madras Legislative Council was a duller place after Satyamurti left it." But Satyamurti found in the Central Assembly a new and higher forum for his talents. He proved himself a thorn in the flesh of the British rulers. Thus began the last and most memorable phase of Satyamurti's brilliant parliamentary career.

This is how Satyamurti himself picturised the Central Assembly scene in an article: "Sartorial expressions may not have much value, but in the Assembly it was a striking sight to see almost always nearly 44 members wearing Gandhi caps, the very caps for wearing which people were prosecuted, convicted and sentenced and at times beaten. It was particularly good for the Viceroy, when he addressed us, to see the forty-four Gandhi caps."

In the Central Assembly Bhulabhai Desai was selected leader of the Congress party. Satyamurti was first chosen as Secretary of the party and later became its deputy leader. Till then the Assembly had been a puppet show. With Satyamurti dominating the proceedings, the Assembly became a battlefield. A.S. Iyengar, the veteran journalist and the then Information Officer of the

Government of India, described the questions of Satyamurti as the despair of the bureaucracy and the terror of Government members.

## **Battle of wits**

Satyamurti's first shot was moving an adjournment motion on a confidential circular relating to Gandhiji's activities. It suspected that it was another form of Civil Disobedience movement. Satyamurti scoffed at the bad draftsmanship and bad English of the circular. The members of the Government benches were completely nonplussed.

On one occasion Satyamurti made history in the Central Legislative Assembly by speaking continuously for eight hours on his Bill to repeal the 'Repressive Laws'. During this debate the Law Member, Sir N.N. Sircar, observed that he suspected Satyamurti's ploy was for capturing votes. Retorted Satyamurti, "In democracy we believe in catching votes and not in catching the tails of Governors or Viceroys."

B. Shiva Rao, writing in *The Hindu* in an article, said, "I can think of no one in my 36 years of experience in parliamentary life in India, who could build up as he did a powerful case in 30 minutes missing no fact of significance, sacrificing neither lucidity nor vigour of expression."

A British official, admiring one of Satyamurti's speeches on an important resolution, said, "This man should have been in the House of Commons."

Referring to the Constitutional Reforms proposals, the Secretary of State once remarked in the British Parliament, "The British caravan will pass on, even if the dogs bark." In the Assembly Satyamurti gave it back saying, "...we on this side of the House are determined to see the caravan of the Indian National Congress pass on to the fullness of its goal, whatever dogs, British or others, bark."

## **Magnanimity**

In early 1937, the Congress party was preparing throughout India to contest elections to provincial assemblies under the Government of India Act, 1935. Satyamurti had all along worked for the legislative programme. He wanted to leave the Central Assembly and go back to Madras and take up the leadership of the new Legislative Council. Getting elected from the University Graduates' Constituency would have been easy. The Parliamentary Committee also approved his candidature.

However, events took a different turn. In a surprise move, C. Rajagopalachari, who had retired from politics, returned to it. There is an interesting story behind this development.

For a while now the question of office-acceptance was being floated. Who could be the leader commanding everyone's respect? Satyamurti would have been a natural choice if it was only a question of leadership of the party in the Assembly. But it was also a question of linguistic,

regional and other interests. It was crucial that the leader of the party should be a unanimous choice in the interests of the solidarity of the Congress.

Well-meaning friends, therefore, were in search of such a personality. Rajaji was the ideal choice they thought. K. Srinivasan, Managing Editor of *The Hindu*, approached Rajaji on the matter. Rajaji was not willing to go about campaigning and canvassing for a general seat. The only constituency where he could expect an almost unanimous election was the University Constituency. Rajaji agreed to contest if Satyamurti willingly gave up his constituency to him.

When Srinivasan approached Satyamurti, the latter was surprised. But when Rajaji's name was mentioned for party leadership, he willingly offered it to Rajaji. It was Satyamurti's finest hour. In the interest of the party he cast aside his personal claim! Gandhiji said, "You are a miracle worker; you have done what we could not do. I wonder how you gave up your seat."

But when Rajaji formed his ministry, not only was Satyamurti not included in the first Congress cabinet, as was generally expected, but he was not even consulted on its formation.

Satyamurti did not sulk. Instead, he buried himself in the Parliamentary work in the Central Assembly. He was offered the Vice-Chancellorship of the Madras University. Satyamurti declined.

As A.S. Iyengar put it, "Satyamurti never rose to greater heights than when he did this unparalleled act of effacement. He gave no greater lie to his traducers and critics who thought that Satyamurti was after office. He

never held office even for a single minute either under the Congress or under the bureaucracy though others have gone on and tasted the fruits of office.”

Satyamurti's hectic public life did not leave him with much time to look after his health or his family—his wife and his daughter. In connection with Gandhiji's Individual Civil Disobedience, he was sentenced to nine months' imprisonment on December 13, 1940. As his health deteriorated, he was transferred from Vellore jail to the Madras General Hospital for treatment. Satyamurti was allowed the personal attention of his family. They visited him twice a day and helped to tend him in the hospital.

Satyamurti was released on August 23, 1941. But his health continued to remain unsatisfactory. Dr. B.C. Roy examined him and prescribed prolonged rest in view of the condition of his heart. But Satyamurti felt that more than medicine it was public activity that kept him going. Indeed, he was as active as ever.

When he was ailing he had found a suitable match for his daughter. He had even fixed the date of the wedding. When he knew his end was near, he asked his people not to postpone or cancel the wedding. It was done.

## **Letters to Lakshmi**

While undergoing treatment in the Madras General Hospital in 1941, Satyamurti realized that he had hardly devoted any time to his growing daughter. At home he was a devoted husband and a loving father to his only child. It is said that when he went out to work he would

dress well, as always. Before he left home he would often ask Lakshmi how he looked. Though she was very young, he would consult her and ask her opinion on many things.

Lakshmi was turning sixteen in 1941. To make up for the neglect and lack of communication between father and daughter, Satyamurti wrote a letter to her everyday from his hospital bed. The letters, about sixty-eight in all, contained wholesome advice and were meant to instruct and inspire Lakshmi, indeed all children. They have been published as a book, *At the Threshold of Life*.

These letters covered a variety of subjects like art, public speaking, women's education and so on. In one of his letters Satyamurti mentioned that all girls should get the highest possible education in literature. He advised Lakshmi to learn Hindi, Tamil, Sanskrit and English. "I want you to become a great scholar in all these languages and literatures or at least in some of them," he wrote. "Then I want you to know the history and geography of the world to understand world affairs. You must know enough elementary science to take an intelligent interest in things around you. You must know the history and geography and politics of your country fairly intimately. You must know at least one of the fine arts—music or painting..."

In another letter he quoted a Sanskrit poem which meant, "He who is devoid of poetry, music and art is a real beast, only he has no tails or horns." Referring to painting and sculpture he said they "give form to our conception of the Divine".

Keen as he was on public speaking, Satyamurti cited from his own experience, giving some useful points and

guidelines. “You must always keep your hand on the pulse of the audience—and long before the audience gets tired you must stop.”

“When you address public audiences you must prepare your speeches in advance. I always do, unless I am taken by surprise. Then I do my best. When members of the audience do you the honour of hearing you, you must return the compliment by preparing your speeches carefully.” Above all he laid stress on a well modulated voice while delivering a speech.

On August 8, 1942, the All India Congress Committee passed the famous ‘Quit India’ resolution in Bombay. Following this all the leaders including Gandhiji were arrested. Satyamurti left Bombay for Madras on August 10. Before his departure Dr. Gilder, Gandhiji’s physician, examined him and declared him unfit to work.

Satyamurti was arrested at Arkonam on August 11, 1942, and taken to Vellore jail. From there he was transferred to Amraoti (now in Maharashtra) jail. As his condition worsened he was sent back to Madras and admitted to the General Hospital on January 10, 1943. Despite some improvement, complications soon set in. Satyamurti passed away on March 28, 1943.

“A restless soul has found rest,” said Rajaji.

## **Varied interests**

Though politics took most of his time and energy, Satyamurti’s interests were wide. He distinguished himself in many fields ranging from fine arts to education. Whatever task he undertook, he did a thorough job of it.

In the field of education, as mentioned earlier, he was an elected member of the Senate of the Madras University for several years. He was also the prime mover behind the establishment of the Annamalai University and took an active interest in its affairs.

As a lover of arts, and music especially, he encouraged and patronized musicians. He was one of the founder members of the Music Academy, Madras. He would regularly arrange for two or three music concerts by leading musicians at his house.

Satyamurti was also interested in the stage. He acted in many of the plays produced by the Suguna Vilas Sabha, one of the oldest cultural organizations of Madras.

Among languages his first love was Sanskrit. Thanks to his early training under his father, he could speak in Sanskrit. He was one of the pillars of the Sanskrit Academy in Madras. Next to Sanskrit he loved Tamil. His style was simple and straight. He was equally at home with English. He advocated that the medium of instruction in schools should be in the mother tongue and English should be an optional subject.

Satyamurti took keen interest in civic and municipal affairs. He became the Mayor of Madras in 1939. He took considerable interest in keeping the city clean and green.

Aside from politics, his interest in public affairs was varied. He took up the cause and fought for the kisans, the landlords, for the grievances of non-gazetted officers, the workers, for students' demands.

Satyamurti was deeply religious. He started the day very early with a bath. He performed daily pujas and

would recite a few verses of the *Ramayana* before proceeding to work.

He was a great devotee of Jagadgurus Sankaracharyas of Kanchi and Sringeri. He would frequently visit them, pay his respects to them and even discuss with them burning issues of the day.

“Do good, be good.” This is how he explained the essence of the Hindu religion, his faith and creed and he lived up to it. “I profoundly and sincerely believe that if we live good lives, control our senses and do only good to others and no harm, sooner or later we must attain *moksha*.”

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“This country will obtain her freedom—when after 20, 30, or 40 years hence our children and our children’s children will be talking of those days when we were slaves of England, they will ask themselves, what their fathers and forefathers did in those days. For God’s sake, please do leave them the heritage of saying ‘our fathers and forefathers fought a good non-violent battle for the freedom of India’; but do not leave them the ugly heritage of saying that their fathers and forefathers voted for this despicable (Criminal Law Amendment) Bill.”

S. Satyamurti

# B.R. AMBEDKAR

Anil Ekbote



“I shall strive for a Constitution, which will release India from all thralldom and patronage...I shall work for India, in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country, in whose making they have an effective voice; an India in which there shall be no high class and low class of people; an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony. There can be no room in such India for the curse of untouchability or the curse of the intoxicating drinks and drugs. Women will enjoy the same rights as men...All interests not in conflict with the interests of the dumb millions will be scrupulously avoided.”

Mahatma Gandhi

## B.R. AMBEDKAR

For centuries together, people belonging to the lowest caste amongst the Hindus of India, have continued to be uncared and unloved. These people were not only despised, ostracized and looked down upon, but also humiliated by the caste Hindus, being treated by them as ‘untouchables’.

The caste Hindus did not allow the ‘untouchables’ to live amongst them or touch the water of their wells or village tanks. The ‘untouchables’ were also forbidden to enter Hindu temples and were denied learning and education. Good jobs or businesses were not for them. They were only allowed to sweep roads, make or repair shoes, weave baskets of cane or skin dead animals. A few lucky ones would find employment as bonded labourers in the fields and homes of landlords or as servants in village offices. To add to their woes were strict codes on how they should dress, what they should eat and of what metals their vessels and ornaments should be made.

Thus, for hundreds of years, the ‘untouchables’ lived a life of poverty, illiteracy, backbreaking hardships and untold suffering.

Into one such ‘untouchable’, Marathi-speaking, ‘Mahar’ family was born Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar on whom India, in 1990, proudly and gratefully conferred its highest title of ‘Bharat Ratna’, the jewel of India.

## **Childhood**

Babe Bhim, born on April 14, 1891, in Mhow in Central India, was the fourteenth child of Ramji and Bhimabai Sakpal. He was affectionately called Bhima; and the name Bhimrao stuck to him until he completed his college studies. Like his grandfather, Maloji, Bhim’s father, Ramji Sakpal, too, was in the army of the British Government.

In those days the British Government had made education compulsory for the men in the army. The Government also ran schools for their women and children. Both, Maloji and Ramji, were indeed the rare and fortunate ones amongst the Mahars to have the benefits of learning.

When Bhim was hardly two years old, his father retired from the army. For fourteen years Ramji had been the headmaster of the military school and at the time of retirement he had attained the rank of ‘Subedar-Major’ in the 2nd Grenadiers. The family now came down from Central India to Dapoli in Konkan, a coastal region along the Western Ghats. At the age of five Bhim joined a

school in Dapoli. But soon Ramji got a job in Satara and the family had to shift now to Satara. There Bhim and his elder brother, Anand, joined the cantonment school—Government High School.

When Bhim was six, his mother, Bhimabai, died. Ramji's sister, Meerabai, began to look after the family. Meerabai was a short, hunchbacked and good-natured woman. Of Ramji and Bhimabai's fourteen children, only five, three sons and two daughters, had survived. The daughters were married and living with their husbands. Therefore, Bhim, the youngest of the five, became everyone's favourite.

Ramji Sakpal was a strict disciplinarian. He lived a simple, pious life. He never ate meat or touched liquor which was a rare thing amongst the 'untouchables'. Ramji wanted his children to acquire an interest in learning and to develop a good character. Early mornings he made the children sing devotional songs. He read to them stories from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. He made them learn poems and songs composed by Namdev, Tukaram, Moropant and Mukteshwar. Everyday, late in the evening, the father and the children together sang the hymns. This daily ritual not only had a good influence on Bhim's mind and spirit, it also helped him learn and use chaste Marathi.

Ramji Sakpal was a friend and admirer of Jotiba Phule, who was working to educate the 'untouchables' and to make them socially acceptable as equals by the upper caste Hindus. Ramji, greatly impressed by Jotiba's ceaseless work, never missed an opportunity to help his 'untouchable' brethren and, thus, set a good example to his children.

## **‘Untouchable’**

Ramji Sakpal married a widow named Jijabai and brought her home. Somehow little Bhim could not bring himself to love his stepmother. He especially disliked her when she wore his mother’s sarees and ornaments.

Bhim also began to get a taste of the bitter reality of being born an ‘untouchable’. He had already noticed how the shopkeepers dropped packets and parcels in his mother’s hands, taking care not to touch her.

In school, Bhim was made to sit on the floor in one corner of the classroom. As such, everyday he had to carry to the school a piece of gunny to sit upon. Further, teachers would not touch his notebooks. Some of them even refused to put him questions or ask him to recite or read from his books. If Bhim felt thirsty in school he could quench his thirst only if and when someone agreed to pour water into his open mouth.

One summer day, Bhim and his elder brother, Anand, together with their little nephew, set out in a train to visit their father who worked as a cashier in Goregaon. But the message about their starting did not reach Ramji. As such the children found that no one had come to receive them at the railway station. After a long wait they engaged a bullock cart to take them to Goregaon. Hardly had the cart begun to move when the cartman, to his utter horror, realized that the neatly dressed children were ‘untouchables’. In a fit of fury, he dumped them on the road. After a lot of cajoling and enticing the cartman with a promise of double the agreed fare, they worked out an arrangement. The children would travel in the

bullock cart but it would be driven by Anand and the cartman would follow them, on foot. Thus the children travelled far into the night. On the way they could not get any water to drink. For, whenever they pleaded for it, people either bluntly refused to serve them or they asked the children to help themselves from the filthy water collected in roadside ditches or ponds. This incident made Bhim realize what it was to be an 'untouchable'.

To etch this shocking experience permanently on his mind yet another incident occurred. Provoked by an uncontrollable fit of thirst, Bhim stealthily began to drink from a public reservoir. But he was found out and mercilessly beaten black and blue by the caste Hindus.

Bhim also began to experience regularly another humiliating and shameful practice. The local barber who did not mind when called in to shave the village buffaloes, refused to defile himself by touching Bhim's hair. So, Bhim's sister had to help Bhim keep his head properly shaved with a round tuft and a tiny pigtail.

Even at that young age, Bhim realized that it was not just he alone who was being thus humiliated, but the entire lot of people belonging to the 'untouchable' castes of the Hindus and that too, since ages.

## **Education**

It was while studying in Satara that Bhim acquired the surname 'Ambedkar'. Bhim's forefathers originally belonged to a place called Ambavade in the Konkan region. As per the practice of all Marathi-speaking

Hindus, together with the actual surname Sakpal, Bhim had another surname—Ambavadekar. Bhim's teacher, Ambedkar, felt that the surname 'Ambavadekar' was a bit long and untidy. He simplified it and got it entered in the school records as 'Ambedkar'. Teacher Ambedkar and another teacher, Pendse, were the only ones in the entire school who were kind and affectionate towards Bhim. No wonder, throughout his life, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar remembered them gratefully.

In studies, Bhim was just average. This was mainly because he was not concentrating on it. He had become fond of gardening and, whenever he could, he bought plants and saplings. With great devotion he nurtured them and watched them grow.

It was while studying in Satara that an incident changed Bhim's attitude towards studies. Bhim had learned that boys from Satara who had gone to Bombay, had got jobs in mills and were doing very well on their own. Bhim, too, craved to take up a good job and be independent. He decided to run away to Bombay. But where was the fare for the journey? His aunt, Meerabai, used to tuck a small sachet of money at her waist. Bhim decided to steal this sachet and run away from home. He spent three tense and sleepless nights attempting to pull away the sachet. On the fourth night he succeeded. But to his great disappointment, there was very little money in the sachet.

Bhim realized his mistake. He felt ashamed of himself. He decided that he would never do such things in future. He would begin to work hard at his studies.

In the fourth standard one had to start learning a new language. Bhim was keen on taking up Sanskrit. But the

Sanskrit teacher firmly declared that he would never teach Sanskrit to an ‘untouchable’. With a heavy heart Bhim took up the study of Persian instead.

The term of Ramji’s job in Satara was soon over and the family now came to Bombay. Ramji was much concerned about Bhim’s progress at school. He was not satisfied with his average performance. “I am regularly passing examinations; then why should father be so much after me?” Bhim would often grumble. Yet, Ramji’s perseverance had begun to show results, though in a different way.

Bhim became interested in reading. Not just the prescribed school books but books in general, too. He fell in love with books. But being an ‘untouchable’, normal access to books was almost impossible for him. The only way out was to buy them. Ramji was not very happy to see Bhim read books which were not related to his studies. But he never said ‘no’ when it came to buying them. If he lacked money, he went to one of his married daughters, borrowed a piece of jewellery, pawned it and with the money so obtained bought books desired by Bhim.

In Bombay, they lived in a small room in Dabak chawl in Parel. The room was full of household items. In one corner heaps of fuelwood was stored on a shelf. In another was the *chulha* (stove) for cooking. The same room was used for eating as well as for sleeping. Every night it also provided shelter to a goat.

Ramji found a way out so that Bhim could study undisturbed in this room. While Bhim slept, with the goat at his feet, Ramji stayed awake till well past midnight.

He then woke up Bhim who studied for an hour or two.

But the atmosphere of Elphinstone High School, which Bhim joined, was far from being quiet and conducive to his studies. Even though a government school, when Bhim was called upon by the teacher to do a sum on the blackboard, the students broke into an agitated commotion. They had kept their lunch-boxes behind the blackboard and they were afraid that Bhim's touching the blackboard would, in turn, pollute their lunch. Even one of the teachers constantly mocked at Bhim saying of what use was studying in school to a Mahar.

Bhim swallowed these insults. He did not allow the rising anger in him show itself. He continued his studies and passed the matriculation examination in 1907.

It was a rare and great event for an 'untouchable' to study so much. So, the Mahar community held a meeting and felicitated Bhim Rao.

Soon Ramji got the 17-year-old Bhim married to nine-year-old Ramabai. The marriage was held, of all places, in an open market shed in Byculla, Bombay.

## **Vast learning**

To continue studies, Bhim Rao joined the Elphinstone College. Even here Bhim Rao suffered for being a Mahar. He was anguished to see all around the 'untouchables' being treated similarly. Along with his college studies, Bhim Rao continued to read incessantly. He completed his Intermediate course. It was beyond Ramji's means to bear the cost of Bhim's further education. Fortunately, the Maharaja of Baroda, Sayaji Rao, granted a scholarship

which enabled Bhim Rao take the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1912.

Ramji died on February 2, 1913. The father who had made Bhim Rao into what he was, was no more. The burden of looking after the family now rested on Bhim Rao's young shoulders.

Once again Sayaji Rao, the Maharaja of Baroda, came to his rescue. Sayaji Rao selected Bhim Rao to be sent to America on a scholarship for higher studies. In return, Bhim Rao had to serve the State of Baroda for ten years.

Bhim Rao reached New York in July 1913. There he had to put in an amazing amount of hard work as he had determined to study not only for the university degree but also several other subjects such as economics, political and social sciences, law, moral science and anthropology. He wrote a thesis on 'Ancient Indian Commerce' and, in 1915, acquired the Master of Arts degree. Simultaneously, he also wrote another thesis, 'National Dividend for India : A Historical and Analytical Study' which was accepted by the Columbia University in 1916; when published eight years later, the University decided to confer on him a Doctorate of Philosophy.

In America, for the first time Bhim Rao experienced what it was not to be ostracized and treated as an 'untouchable', what it felt like to live as an equal of the other members of the society. Bhim Rao realized that if Mahars wished to wipe off the stigma of untouchability, they would have to become educated.

From America Bhim Rao proceeded to London to study economics and political science. But before he could complete his studies, the Baroda government terminated

his scholarship. Bhim Rao was forced to return to India. But he vowed that he would go back one day and complete his studies.

Even during this period of heavy studies, Bhim Rao did not stop reading and buying books. In spite of his meagre scholarship, he was able to buy over 2000 books by living frugally.

Bhim Rao returned to India and, as agreed, went to Baroda to serve the government. But who cared for a low-caste, 'untouchable' Mahar, even if he was highly educated and held the rank of the Military Secretary to the Maharaja?

Bhim Rao's subordinates would stand at a distance and throw files and papers to him. No one would serve him water when he needed it. He could not even get a place to live in. As a last resort, without revealing his caste, he got himself admitted into a Parsee hostel. When they learnt that Bhim Rao was a Mahar, they rudely turned him out. Even the Maharaja's Dewan could do nothing in the matter. A broken Bhim sat under a tree and wept bitterly. Thereafter, Bhim returned to Bombay in November 1917. A few days later, his stepmother died.

Bhim took a part time job as a lecturer in Sydenham College with the sole aim of saving money and going to London to finish his studies. In college his teaching was much liked. Yet, the humiliating treatment by the caste Hindus continued. Bhim Rao began to feel the urge to eradicate untouchability.

At this time, Shahu Maharaj, the Maharaja of Kolhapur, was taking a keen interest in the welfare of the depressed classes. He provided free education with free boarding

and lodging facilities to the 'untouchable' students. He also gave the 'untouchables' jobs and encouraged them in all possible ways. With Shahu Maharaj's help, Bhim Rao started a fortnightly newspaper, *Mooknayak* (Leader of the Dumb), on January 31, 1920. It was aimed at pulling down the caste barriers amongst the Hindus and removing untouchability. Shahu Maharaj also convened several meetings and conferences of the 'untouchables' which Bhim Rao addressed. On March 21, 1920, Bhim Rao presided over one such conference at Kolhapur. At this meeting Shahu Maharaj told the 'untouchables', "You have found your saviour in Ambedkar. I am confident that he will break your shackles."

Bhim Rao Ambedkar had certainly begun trying to break the shackles that tied down the 'untouchables'. But amongst the 'untouchables' themselves there were many sects and sub-sects which kept away from each other. Once, after great persuasion, Ambedkar succeeded in inviting leaders of 18 sub-sects of the Mahar community to dine together. It was not possible for him yet to make all communities of 'untouchables' come together. Ambedkar had a tough task ahead of him.

However, the immediate task before him was to go to London. And in September 1920, when he could pool sufficient funds from various sources, he returned to London, completed his studies and returned to India.

Bhim Rao Ambedkar was now a barrister. He also had a Doctorate in Science from London and a Doctorate in Philosophy from the United States of America. He was well equipped to meet all challenges that he might possibly face in his fight against untouchability.

## Work begins

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar was a Mahar and, as such, even while practising law he had to encounter many hurdles. Facing them bravely, he took up the work of eradicating untouchability in right earnest. For this purpose, he set up the Bahishkrut Hitakarini Sabha, in July 1924. The organization aimed at uplifting the people of the downtrodden classes and making them socially and politically equal to others in the Indian society. There were already a few other institutions and organizations working for the betterment of the downtrodden people. Their work was upliftment whereas Dr. Ambedkar's Bahishkrut Hitakarini Sabha wanted the entire caste system to be scrapped from the Hindu religion. To strike at a system in existence for over two thousand years was an uphill task indeed.

Giving first priority to education, the Bahishkrut Hitakarini Sabha started free schools for the young as well as the old. It also ran reading rooms and libraries. Dr. Ambedkar took the grievances of the 'untouchables' to the courts and won them justice. Soon he became a father-figure to the poor and the depressed. They began to call him 'Baba' and, more respectfully, as 'Babasaheb'. Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar had popularly become Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar.

In 1929, the Government nominated Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar to the Bombay Legislative Council to represent the interests of the depressed classes.

Earlier, in 1923, at the instance of a social worker, Raobahadur Sitaram Bole, the Bombay Legislative

Council had passed a resolution to keep public places open to all irrespective of religion, caste or creed. However, this resolution was not implemented. The 'untouchables' were too meek to assert themselves to use public places. For instance, they continued to stay away from the 'Chavdar Taley', the 'Sweet-water Tank' in Mahad in Kulaba district.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar decided to act. A conference of the depressed classes was held at Mahad on March 19-20, 1927. About ten thousand delegates, workers and leaders, attended. Babasaheb made a moving speech. Referring to the British Government's banning the recruitment of 'untouchables' into the military, he said, "The military offered us unique opportunities of raising our standard of life and proving our merit and intellect, courage and brilliance as army officers. 'Untouchables' could also be headmasters of military schools and compulsory primary education in the military camps was very effective and wholesome...It is nothing less than a betrayal and a treachery on the part of the British to have closed the doors of the army to the 'untouchables'."

He told the gathering forthrightly, "No lasting progress can be achieved unless we put ourselves through a threefold process of purification. We must improve the general tone of our demeanour, re-tone our pronunciation and revitalize our thoughts. I, therefore, ask you now to take a vow to renounce eating carrion, the rotten flesh of dead animals, from this moment. It is high time that we rooted out from our mind the ideas of highness and lowness amongst ourselves. Make an unflinching resolve not to eat the thrown-away crumbs. We will attain self-

elevation only if we learn self-help, regain our self respect and gain self-knowledge.”

The conference decided to assert its right to the water of Chavdar Taley. On the second day, led by Babasaheb, the delegates walked to the nearby tank and tasted its water. The infuriated caste Hindus attacked them. They beat them, pulled down the conference pandal, threw away the cooked food and broke all vessels. Babasaheb advised his people to stay calm and not to retaliate.

Later, the caste Hindus performed rituals to ‘purify’ the defiled sweet-water tank. Babasaheb took this as an insult to the people of the other castes. He declared that he would offer a satyagraha and re-establish his people’s right over the tank water.

Accordingly, on December 25, 1927, thousands of ‘untouchables’ arrived from various places to offer satyagraha. As speaker after speaker spoke, passions rose and the vast gathering excitedly waited for the satyagraha to begin. However, the satyagraha was deferred as the matter was referred to the court. But, at the end of the conference, a copy of *Manusmruti*, the age-old code of the Hindus which gave rise to the caste system, was burnt ceremoniously. In a thundering voice, Babasaheb demanded in its place a new *smruti*. A new *smruti* that would be devoid of socially unjust laws. The burning of *Manusmruti* sent shock waves throughout the nation. Babasaheb had become a force to reckon with.

Babasaheb struggled to secure for the ‘untouchables’ the right to use a public tank or well or entry into temples because it would indicate that the depressed classes had become acceptable to the caste Hindus.

## **Against the tide**

In the Legislative Council, Babasaheb took a strong stand on matters relating to education, prohibition, taxes and welfare of women and children. But the cause dearest to his heart was the upliftment of the depressed classes.

In the year 1928, he introduced a Bill to bring about a revolutionary change in the living conditions of the Mahars. As per the then existing law, a Mahar serving the Government was required to slave all day and all night. In his absence, a member of his family had to serve the Government. For this ceaseless service, the Mahar got a piece of land called 'watan', a small quantity of corn and a pittance for wage.

Through his Bill Babasaheb tried to end this slavery. However, the Bill could not be passed for lack of cooperation from other members of the Legislative Council. While arguing for the Bill, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar found himself facing strong opposition.

Not only on this matter, but on several other issues too Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had to swim against the tide. For instance, when the Simon Commission was appointed in 1929 by the British Government to examine the question of giving freedom to India, the Indian National Congress party decided to boycott it. On its arrival in India, the Simon Commission was greeted with black flags and slogans of "Go back, Simon!" Meanwhile, various political parties had jointly appointed a committee headed by Motilal Nehru. This committee drafted a Constitution for free India. This was the first Indian attempt at constitution-making. Sadly, this Constitution

did not have any special provision for the representation of the depressed classes in the legislatures.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar could not accept this. He decided to cooperate with the Simon Commission and try to safeguard the interests of the depressed classes. For this act, he was condemned and accused as being a British stooge. He was even called a traitor.

During this time over a lakh textile mill workers in Bombay had gone on a strike which had continued for about six months. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar saw that the living condition of the poor, 'untouchable' workers was becoming increasingly miserable. In the textile mills, the 'untouchables' were kept away from better paid jobs. The organizers of the strike, the Communists, were doing nothing to improve their lot. The strike seemed totally political in nature. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, once again, swam against the current. He advised the depressed class workers to disassociate themselves from the strike which, even if successful, would fetch them nothing. The depressed class workers heeded his advice, broke away from the striking group and went back to their work.

All the while Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was also continuing the struggle on other fronts. He was taken in as a member on the Starte Committee appointed by the Bombay Government to study the educational, economic and social conditions of the depressed classes and to recommend measures for their uplift.

Even while touring various districts with the Starte Committee, there were several instances when Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was treated humiliatingly. In its report the Starte Committee said that although

the depressed classes observed Hindu laws, rites and festivals, they were forcibly made to live in isolation. The Committee felt that common schools would facilitate their schooling. It recommended increased scholarships and larger number of hostels for them and facilities for technical training in industries, mills and railway workshops. The Committee also recommended that members of the depressed classes be recruited in police and military services and a Special Officer be appointed to look after the implementation of the Committee's recommendations.

In March 1930, when Gandhi was leading the Dandi March to begin the Civil Disobedience movement, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was leading a satyagraha demanding that the 'untouchables' also be allowed into the famous Ram *mandir* (temple) of Nasik.

## **Round Table Conference**

Following a Simon Commission recommendation, the British Government invited princes of the Indian states and leaders of various parties for a discussion. For this Round Table Conference, held in London from November 1930 to January 1931, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was invited to represent the cause of the 'untouchables'.

Speaking at the conference, Dr. Ambedkar said that he was placing the viewpoint of one-fifth of the total population of British India which had been reduced to a position worse than that of a serf or a slave. He said,

“Before the British, we were in a loathsome condition due to our untouchability. Has the British Government done anything to remove it? Before the British, we could not draw water from a village well. Has the British Government secured us the right to the well? Before the British, we could not enter a temple. Can we enter now? Before the British, we were denied entry into the police force. Does the British Government admit us into the force now? Before the British, we were not allowed to serve in the military. Is that career now open to us? To none of these questions can we give an affirmative answer. All the wrongs have remained as open sores and they have not been righted although 150 years of British rule have rolled away.”

The vivid picture of the plight of the ‘untouchables’ in India drawn by Dr. Ambedkar made the world, for the first time, aware of their fate. At this Round Table Conference, Dr. Ambedkar strongly upheld the demand for a Dominion Status for India and cautioned the Constitution-makers to keep in mind, while framing the Constitution, that the evil of caste system was a great hindrance to achieving equality and fraternity.

Most significantly Dr. Ambedkar also prepared with great labour and statesmanship the Declaration of fundamental rights of the depressed classes. He submitted the scheme to be included in future in the Constitution of India. Numerous meetings of the depressed classes held all over India discussed this document and passed resolutions supporting it.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was invited to the second session of the Round Table Conference, too. This time

he was on the Federal Structure Committee entrusted with the task of drafting the future Constitution of India. A highlight of this second session was the participation of Mahatma Gandhi.

## **The Poona Pact**

At the Round Table Conference Mahatma Gandhi said that the interests of the 'untouchables' were as dear to the Indian National Congress as the interests of any other body or of any other individual in India. He believed that the 'untouchables' were an integral part of the Hindu community and he did not want them to be set apart in any manner. He, therefore, declared that he would resist any special representation given to the depressed classes.

This stand was entirely different from Dr. Ambedkar's who was firm on obtaining for the depressed classes their own separate electorate. Further, Dr. Ambedkar believed that the Congress was not very sincere and serious about the problem of untouchability. For, if it really were, he argued, the Congress would have made giving up untouchability and eating together with the 'untouchables' a pre-condition for joining the Congress party, just like it had laid down the pre-condition regarding the use of khadi. He was afraid that even in free India the caste Hindus would continue to ill-treat the 'untouchables'.

Back in India, when a separate electorate for the depressed classes was announced, Mahatma Gandhi was in prison at Yerwada near Poona. He was so hurt that he

began a fast unto death against this decision. This shook the nation.

As days passed the entire nation became anxious about Mahatma Gandhi's health. But Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was firm in his stand, even if it meant standing against Mahatma Gandhi and facing a hostile, angry nation. He announced that he was not willing to allow the rights of the depressed classes to be curtailed in any manner.

Visitors, leaders, friends and others began to call on Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. They began to appeal to him and put pressure. Furious campaigns were launched against him. But he did not relent. Finally, a meeting was arranged between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar at the Yerwada prison. Two days later, on September 24, 1932, a pact known as the Poona Pact was signed by the two leaders. According to this, the separate electorate for the depressed classes was scrapped. Instead, the depressed classes were given several concessions like 148 seats reserved in the regional legislative assemblies and 18 per cent seats in the Central Council of States. Mahatma Gandhi's life was saved. The nation's eyes were opened to the vital problem of untouchability. As a result several public wells and temples were opened to the depressed classes.

In November 1932, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar attended the third session of the Round Table Conference.

## **Sorrow**

Continuous hard work began to tell on Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's health. It became necessary for him to take

plenty of rest. For this purpose, in March 1934, he went to Bordi and Mahabaleshwar.

By this time one of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's pet dreams had materialized. His home, specially and assiduously designed by him to house his vast collection of books, was completed. It was named 'Rajgruha'. On the ground floor lived Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and his unassuming wife, Ramabai. On the floor above were neatly stacked books. Thousands and thousands of them.

On May 27, 1935, after a brief illness, Ramabai died. The strong and courageous Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who had earlier braved so many odds in life could neither bear the loss of his wife nor the grief. He broke down, a shattered man.

Before Ramabai's death, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had accepted the post of the principal of Law College offered by the Bombay Government. He joined it, after her death, in June 1935. He had now become a government servant and people thought that, in accordance with the government rules, he would have to give up politics.

Outside politics, the life of an 'untouchable', even if he were as educated and accomplished as Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, continued to be bitter and shameful, agonizing and infuriating. His long struggle and painstaking efforts seemed to be showing little results. Many a time he found this situation frustrating.

On October 13, 1935, at a conference in Yeola, Nasik, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar reviewed the improvement in the status and the living conditions of the 'untouchables' in the previous decade or so since they had begun their

struggle for the upliftment of the depressed classes. In a moving account, Dr. Ambedkar recounted their plight in various spheres such as economic, social, educational and political, as members of the Hindu community. He told the gathering that he had painfully realized that all the time and money spent and all the efforts made by them had borne no fruit; and that the time had come to make a final decision to settle the matter once and for all. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar then exhorted the depressed classes to sever all connections with Hindu religion and seek solace and self-respect in any other religion which could unreservedly offer them equality of treatment, status and opportunities.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's declaration to convert from the Hindu religion took the nation by storm. The Muslims, the Sikhs and the Buddhists invited him and his followers into their religion.

## **Elections**

As the year 1936 began to draw to an end, there was increased activity and fervour amongst various circles of the Indian population. The British Government had agreed to hold elections the following year so that the provinces could be run autonomously by the elected representatives. The existing political parties like the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha were busily engaged in getting ready for the forthcoming elections. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar began his preparations, too.

He established a new political party in August 1936, calling it the Independent Labour Party. This party, confined to the Bombay province, had chalked out a programme based on the immediate needs and grievances of the landless, poor tenants, agriculturists and industrial and mill workers.

The elections took place on February 17, 1937. Dr. Ambedkar and many of his candidates won with a thumping majority. On the heels of this victory came another success. The long-drawn case over the use of water of the Chavdar Taley of Mahad was decided by the Bombay High Court in favour of the depressed classes.

In the Bombay Provincial Legislative Assembly, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar introduced a Bill in 1937 to abolish the 'khoti' system of land tenure in the Konkan region. When passed, this Bill would bring the benefits of agriculture to the poor who actually possessed and tilled tiny pieces of lands, and not to the rich 'khot' who headed all of them. He also introduced a Bill to abolish the serfdom of agricultural tenants and another Bill to abolish the Mahar 'watan' for which he had been agitating for over a decade.

One of the clauses of an agrarian Bill defined depressed classes as 'Harijans', the people of God. Strongly protesting against the introduction of this new term, Dr. Ambedkar asked, "If the 'untouchables' were the people of God, were the touchables assumed to belong to the monsters?" He firmly told the Assembly that if all the people were to be called Harijans, he would not object. The issue was put to vote. The Indian National Congress,

being in an overall majority, succeeded in introducing the new term Harijan. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, whose party had secured 13 out of the 15 seats reserved for the depressed classes, felt bitter that they did not have any say in what they should be called.

In 1939, the second world war broke out. Without consulting the Indian leaders, the British Government announced that India would support them in the war. Protesting against this high-handedness, the Congress governments in all the provinces resigned.

Even as the war continued, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's book, *Thoughts on Pakistan* was published. In this book he provided an ably argued case for the creation of Pakistan. It generated a lot of criticism and debate.

At this time Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was also holding a series of meetings to advise the people of the depressed classes to join the British army. He also met the Governor of Bombay and requested him to lift the ban on the entry of the Mahars in the military and to raise a new Mahar battalion. His request was conceded and soon a new Mahar battalion took shape.

This act of exhorting the depressed classes to join the British army, especially when the freedom struggle was gaining ground in India, was looked upon by many as an aid to the foreign rulers. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was strongly criticized and, even scoffed at. But, he, who had the welfare of the depressed classes at heart, did not bother about the accusations. He was used to swimming against the tide.

As though to compensate for this 'rejection' on the part of the majority, the Viceroy of India appointed

Dr. Ambedkar on the Defence Advisory Committee set up in July 1941. The next year, in June 1942, the Viceroy included Dr. Ambedkar in the Executive Council. Never before in the history of India had an 'untouchable' risen to such a high office in the administration of the country.

On August 9, 1942, Gandhi launched the Quit India movement. The entire nation was imbued with a 'do or die' spirit. Things were happening in quick succession. Towards the end of 1945, Lord Wavell announced general elections.

Hectic activity started once again as all parties plunged into electioneering work. On behalf of his Scheduled Class Federation, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, too, set out on whirlwind tours, addressing meetings telling his followers that for the welfare of the depressed classes they had to win every single seat reserved for the depressed classes. However, when the results to the election were announced Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and his candidates found themselves miserably routed. To Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, losing the election was like getting a stroke of political paralysis.

## **Independence**

With mounting pressure for freedom from the Indian masses and with the patriotic upsurge caused by the story of the Indian National Army, the revolt of the Royal Indian Naval Ratings and the Royal Indian Air Force, the Britishers realized that it was no longer possible for them to keep India in bondage. In 1946, the British Prime

Minister, Clement Attlee, openly acknowledged India's right to full independence.

A delegation of three British Cabinet Ministers, which later came to be known as the Cabinet Mission, came to India and held talks with various parties and leaders. It was now decided by the British Government to set up a new Indian Government with the representatives of the parties successful in the elections. The Viceroy's Executive Council was broken up. Dr. Ambedkar found himself being relieved of his official responsibility and gaining further opportunity to work for the depressed classes.

In such a situation he found one of his cherished dreams come into being. He had always wanted to set up an educational institution with modern facilities and equipment and a qualified staff with proven merit. For this purpose he founded the People's Educational Society in 1945. In June 1946, the Society opened its first college, the Siddharth College.

On June 29, a caretaker government was announced and the Cabinet Mission left for London.

Though the Indian National Congress had also taken up the task of uplifting the Harijans, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was not sure about the results. He feared that in free India the Harijans would once again be impoverished, neglected and ostracized from society and public places. So, along with his people, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar started a strong agitation against the Congress. He asked them to spell out clearly the position, status and rights of the depressed classes in free India.

As laid down by the Cabinet Mission, members were

elected by provincial legislative assemblies to form a Constituent Assembly whose task was to frame a Constitution. However, the representatives of the scheduled class from Bengal, together with the support of the Muslim League, brought Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar into the Constituent Assembly. His deep knowledge and understanding and his lucid and impressive style of speaking soon won the hearts of all the members. Besides, he had painstakingly prepared and submitted to the Assembly a draft on "States and Minorities". On April 29, 1947, the Constituent Assembly declared that untouchability in all forms would be abolished.

On July 15, 1947, the British Parliament passed the Act of Indian Independence. It was now time to form the first Cabinet of ministers of free India. In a surprising move, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was invited to join the Cabinet as Minister for Law. He accepted the offer.

On August 15, 1947, India became free.

### **Constitution-maker**

The Constituent Assembly of Independent India appointed a Drafting Committee with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar as its Chairman. The same Ambedkar, who, two decades ago, had burnt the *Manusmruti* and demanded a new *smruti* for the Hindus, was now called upon to draft a Constitution of Independent India where the majority of people were Hindus.

While taking care of his ministry, Dr. Ambedkar toiled incessantly to draft a Constitution for a country so ancient, so vast and so varied. Though the Drafting Committee

was made up of seven members, for various reasons, the stupendous task fell on the shoulders of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Six months later, in February 1948, he completed his work. The Draft Constitution was placed before the people of India. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's labour had borne fruit.

But the labour had also taken its toll. The tremendous physical and mental strain affected Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's health. He began to suffer from bouts of neurotic pains which continued for hours together, and, at times, even stretched over a whole day or two. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar came to Bombay for treatment. He realized that after his wife, Ramabai's death he had no companion who would love and take care of him. Such a companion he found in Dr. Sharada Kabir, who worked in the same hospital where Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was receiving treatment. They decided to get married. On April 15, 1948, when Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had turned 57, they were married.

After recovery and a new domestic life, he returned to his work. In October 1948, his book, *The Untouchables*, in English, was published.

On November 4, after the Draft Constitution had remained before the public for six months for debate and discussion, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar introduced it in the Constituent Assembly. It contained 395 Articles and eight Schedules. Describing it as a formidable document, Dr. Ambedkar, in his speech, brought out the Draft's salient as well as special features. He also convincingly answered all criticism that arose out of inadequate and incomplete understanding of the Articles. An elaborate

and comprehensive discussion took place on each and every section of every single Article before adoption.

On November 29, 1948, amidst great acclamation, Article 11 of the Constitution, which declared the abolition of untouchability, was adopted.

The whole Constitution was read thrice in the Assembly and, with its 395 Articles and eight Schedules, adopted by the Constituent Assembly, on November 26, 1949. The most significant feature of the Indian Constitution is that sovereignty is vested in the people, and Parliament, as the representative of the people, carries that sovereignty.

Along with the stupendous work of drafting the Constitution, Dr. Ambedkar had also worked on revising and codifying the Hindu law. He submitted the Hindu Code Bill to the Constituent Assembly in October 1948. This stirred a hornet's nest.

## **Hindu Law**

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar explained that the purpose of the Hindu Code Bill was to codify and modify certain areas of the Hindu law. It was beneficial to the country's oneness to have the same set of laws for all Hindus. Dr. Ambedkar underscored that the new Republican Constitution of India had given a specific direction that the Government should endeavour to prepare a Civil Code for the benefit of the country as a whole.

But the people and even the Congress party were divided on this issue. As a result, the consideration of the Hindu Code Bill was postponed to the next session,

to be held in September 1951. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's efforts seemed to have gone waste.

While this was happening, Dr. Ambedkar chanced to come closer to the Buddhists and Buddhism, when he addressed a meeting in New Delhi on the occasion of Gautam Buddha's anniversary. He also wrote an article on 'Buddha and the Future of His Religion' praising the virtues of the religion of the Buddha. Further, accompanied by his wife, Dr. Sharada, he also attended a Buddhist conference at Colombo. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar suggested to the 'untouchables' there to embrace Buddhism. Back in India, while speaking at a Buddhist temple in Bombay, in September 1950, he said that in order to end their hardships the people of the depressed classes should embrace Buddhism.

Dr. Ambedkar's health was causing him and his doctor much concern. But before putting himself into the hands of his doctor, he wanted the Hindu Code Bill to be taken up in the Constituent Assembly. The Bill was a golden opportunity to change, by law, the basic framework of the Hindu society and make it more suitable for modern conditions and time. The very idea that he, an 'untouchable', a Mahar, was going to be instrumental in restructuring the Hindu society, thrilled and inspired him. The preparation of the Bill had involved extensive studies and indefatigable work. Dr. Ambedkar had neglected his health. He had even impaired his sight further though his doctor had already advised him to give up reading and writing. Dr. Ambedkar waited anxiously for the Hindu Code Bill to be taken up in the Assembly.

But the majority in the ruling Congress party were still

not keen to see the Bill through. As a result, firstly, the Bill was not taken up as scheduled in September. Next, when it was taken up, it was only a truncated and piecemeal version. Even this version was not allowed to be considered and discussed fully.

A dejected Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar could not tolerate the loss of the golden opportunity. He relinquished his post as a Law Minister. He resigned from the Cabinet.

## **Honours**

The first general elections in the country after the Constitution came into being were held in the beginning of 1952. Dr. Ambedkar contested for the Legislative Assembly and lost. However, in March 1952, he succeeded in getting elected to the Rajya Sabha.

Then came the news that the Columbia University would award him a Doctorate of Law at its convocation. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar went to New York and received the Doctorate on June 5, 1952. On January 12, 1953, the Osmania University of Hyderabad Deccan, conferred on him a Honorary Doctorate of Literature.

Though Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was carrying on with his work in the Rajya Sabha and outside, he was not well. As he advanced in age, his mind was repeatedly filled with thoughts of Buddhism. In December 1954, he went to Rangoon to attend the Third Buddhist World Conference. This conference had a great impact on his mind. He declared that he would propagate Buddhism in India. The year 1955 spread the news that Dr. Ambedkar would change his religion and become a Buddhist.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar began to receive invitations from several Buddhist institutions and organizations to address them. They were moved by his decision to embrace Buddhism. He also announced his decision to start a Buddhist seminary in Bangalore.

From May 1955, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's health began to deteriorate further. His teeth had already been extracted. Now he began to require support and help for getting up and moving about. He also had trouble in breathing. Despite his ill-health, Dr. Ambedkar continued to sit for hours together, at his desk, writing. His book, *The Buddha and his Gospel*, was completed. He also began to write two other books, namely, *Revolutions and Counter-revolutions in India* and *The Buddha and Karl Marx*.

In May 1956, on Buddha's birth anniversary, Dr. Ambedkar announced that the following October he would become a Buddhist. On October 14, he, along with his wife and about three lakh followers embraced Buddhism. When asked why, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar would sharply quip, "Why can't you ask this question to yourself and to your forefathers as to why I am getting out of the Hindu fold and embracing Buddhism?"

A month later, Dr. Ambedkar was in Kathmandu participating in the Fourth Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists. When he returned to India he was over-strained and thoroughly exhausted. Yet he completed the last chapter of his book, *The Buddha and Karl Marx*. He had fixed up a programme of converting many more of his followers to Buddhism on December 16, 1956, at Bombay.

However, on the night of December 5, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar went to bed, never to wake up again. He died in his sleep. Or, as the Buddhists would prefer to say, he had attained 'nirvana'.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's untiring, lifelong efforts for the upliftment of the depressed classes and for creating equality amongst all people of India have left indelible imprints. During his lifetime, Dr. Ambedkar gave India its Constitution which promises equality irrespective of religion, caste, creed or sex and which resolves to usher in a single civil code for the entire country. Separate laws have brought equality between men and men and between men and women, especially in matters relating to marriage, divorce, adoption, inheritance and education. The 'khoti' system in the Konkan region and the Mahar 'watan' system were abolished way back. Today, all temples, public wells and public places are open to the depressed classes and the practice of untouchability is considered a crime. Above all, the need to have one common code for all people is also gaining acceptance. A day is bound to come when Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's ultimate dream of a common civil code for the whole of India will come true.

“We, the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic and to secure to all its citizens: justice, social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all, fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation; in our Constituent Assembly this twenty-sixth day of November 1949, do hereby adopt, enact and give to ourselves this Constitution.”

Preamble to India's Constitution

# KAMALADEVI CHATTOPADHYAYA

Mukta Munjal



“My journey over these decades has been a long but memorable one, and looking back it looks like the sky at twilight, pierced here and there by starry pricks, a little span in the vast eternity, speckled by pitfalls, nevertheless holding rich and abiding experiences, expectations and frustrations, hopes and disappointments, but, above all, an unflagging stamina to keep on the track, to ever march to richer and newer experiences.”

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya

# KAMALADEVI CHATTOPADHYAYA

Today the whole world knows, loves, and uses Indian handicrafts.

Who was responsible for this?

It was Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya. She travelled the length and breadth of India constantly—trying to help some troupe of traditional dancers in Manipur, or going to some miserable village near Qutab Minar to help poor families make decorations for an honourable living.

Rightly called “The High Priestess of Indian Culture”, Kamaladevi, a legend of modern India, was a social rebel. The energetic fighter that she was, Kamaladevi was active upto her last days. Her lifelong affair with the fine arts, theatre, and culture started very early. For the sensitive Kamaladevi, the natural fusion of the seasons with festivals, and the festivals with Indian life appeared to be most significant.

When she met Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhiji at Shantiniketan in 1932, she felt they were telling her something. “Tagore felt that personality can be built through music, Gandhiji felt that personality is built up through crafts, the use of hands.”

## **Childhood**

A truly remarkable personality who, perhaps, more than anyone in India deserves the label—“A Renaissance Person”, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya was born on April 3, 1903, in a Saraswat family of Mangalore. She was the fourth child born to Ananthiah Dhareshwar and his wife Girjabai. Only the eldest child, a girl, was living; two boys had died before Kamaladevi was born.

It was an affluent household in which Kamaladevi grew up. Her father, a self-made man, had retired as Collector— a very important post at that time—and her mother came from one of the richest landed families of Karnataka.

Though the immediate family itself was small, the large house was overflowing with dependents and poor boys, who were being educated by Kamaladevi’s father at his own expense, as was common in those days.

Girjabai, Kamaladevi’s mother, was a woman of unusually strong views and firm convictions. She insisted on certain rules being followed. This, from the very beginning, brought Kamaladevi in conflict with her.

As a child Kamaladevi had more than her normal share of will power and could never see why she should have to do certain things which her mother insisted upon, but

which she did not feel like doing. Girjabai had made a rule that the children should be dressed in white so that any dirt would be immediately noticed. Then there was the routine of gargling with hot water after each meal, and washing one's feet thoroughly before going to bed. Kamaladevi, being a high-spirited child, found this very irksome. But when she was older, she followed this routine every night.

Kamaladevi loved the outdoors. She would wander around in the huge grounds surrounding the house, playing with the servants' children and eating with them.

The vast gardens surrounding the house, with their wealth of trees, shrubs, and undergrowth, were an enchanting world for an imaginative child. For Kamaladevi, they offered both a fairyland and a refuge from the constant conflicts at home. She especially loved the cowshed where she could pet the new-born calf and play with it.

Towards all these pranks, Ananthiah, her father, was tolerant. He had a special way with children and was able to talk to them at their own level. He enjoyed Kamaladevi's acts of rebellion. Ananthiah, unlike Girjabai, never insisted that she should give up the study of nature and put her mind to her books. Studies she disliked, but she loved reading, which her mother had taught her at a very early age.

## **Influences**

Then suddenly, the carefree years were over. For, Ananthiah fell ill and was soon gone. He left all his

property to his son by a previous marriage. Girjabai was, naturally, very hurt and upset. She would repeatedly tell Kamaladevi that since inheritance was still not available to Hindu women, education was the answer to all their problems. Kamaladevi, shocked by what had happened, now turned seriously to her studies.

Girjabai's mother used to live with them. She had a library of her own, and every evening scholars, mostly men from all walks of life, came to the house.

Kamaladevi was hypnotized by the Sanskrit verses, and when the old lady was away from the room, she would sit in her chair holding the largest book she could find, pretending to read it. Slowly the idea of becoming a teacher came to her mind.

She was greatly influenced by her grandmother's ability to sit quietly for hours, absorbed in a world of her own. This quality of stillness became hers for life.

Girjabai read national papers like *Kesari* and *Kal*, which carried the message of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Many years later, when Kamaladevi visited the jail in Mandalay, Burma, now Myanmar, she remembered all that she had read about him. She was heart-broken when he died—on August 1, 1920—just when Mahatma Gandhi planned to launch the Non-cooperation movement.

Another person who left a deep impress on Kamaladevi was her mother Girjabai. Thanks to her, Kamaladevi knew no fear of darkness, ghosts or even gossiping tongues. She spent her time reading and avoiding idle chatter. She also inherited her mother's total disregard of convention. Things which were a must for others meant nothing to her.

Even before she started going to school at the age of seven, Kamaladevi was taking lessons from a well-known musician. School did not curb her high spirits; it did expose her to the enchantment of the stage. This love of the stage was to play an important part in her life and was to have a great impact on the growth and progress of Indian theatre.

Having learnt to read at a very early age Kamaladevi had developed a great love for it. She read whatever she could lay her hands on, even before she could fully understand what she was reading. As she grew older, she read biographies of well-known people. A lasting impression was left on her mind by the autobiography of Annie Besant—*An Autobiography*—for whom she had a great deal of respect. She was fascinated by the stories from the *Puranas*, tales of gallantry and valour of Rajasthan, historical tales and those about women.

In 1917 Kamaladevi heard Annie Besant speaking, soon after her election as President of the Indian National Congress. Earlier, as a little girl of six or seven, Kamaladevi had been taken by her mother to the great woman to be blessed. Kamaladevi always remembered the gentle smile with which the blessing was given in a typical Indian style. The little girl was thrilled and began imagining that something of the lady's greatness had passed into her, enabling her to do great things. Annie Besant's speech made a lasting impression on her young listener.

Kamaladevi's school was located in the beautiful surroundings of a thick woodland, which opened on the river. One day, a thief hiding in the bushes tried to snatch

the chain off Kamaladevi's neck. She fought hard, and made him run away.

## **Marriage**

In 1920, Kamaladevi went to Madras with her sister and her mother. This visit was to change her whole life. She met Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, a poet and writer of great promise, a scion of a brilliant Bengali family, settled in Hyderabad. He saw Kamaladevi at a large public gathering and the same evening, he told the friend with whom he was staying that she was the girl whom he was going to marry.

Kamaladevi took much longer to decide. She admired his works, but felt that he was unstable. Finally she agreed. The marriage, a most orthodox civil ceremony, took place with Girjabai insisting that Kamaladevi's education should continue even after the marriage. She was determined to make her daughter free through knowledge.

But it did not work out that way. Harindranath went off to England three months later, and Kamaladevi returned to Mangalore.

This was a fateful period in the life of the young girl, for here she met Margaret Cousins, known as Gretta, one of the band of British women who played a great part in educating Indian women in liberal ideas. She had a very strong influence on Kamaladevi. All Kamaladevi's yearnings to be of service to society, and especially to women, now began to take a concrete shape in her mind.

Gretta made the trail of women's emancipation, and service to mankind.

Love of books, music, poetry and painting also formed a bond between Kamaladevi and Gretta. Kamaladevi would often sing while Gretta played the piano. Thus it was that Kamaladevi learnt to sing the 'Jana Gana Mana' that Gretta learnt from poet Rabindranath Tagore himself. They had no idea that the song they both loved would one day be adopted as free India's national anthem.

Soon after, Kamaladevi decided to join Harindranath in England. She looked forward to her studies again. She had never thought of herself as a career woman. Girjabai's and Gretta's influence had filled her with a deep desire to serve and be of benefit to the society.

At Cambridge, a family friend advised her to do Sociology. What Kamaladevi wanted was to be equipped to serve her fellow beings in her country. So she joined the Bedford College, London, where Sociology was offered as a subject. She spent half the day in the classroom, and the other half in practical work in the poor East End of London.

## **Theatre movement**

One love which Harindranath and his young wife shared equally was that of the theatre. While in England, they decided to start a theatre movement on their return to India. As soon as they were back, in 1918, Kamaladevi played a leading role in a comic skit called 'Returned from Abroad'. They met Gandhiji and under his

inspiration, they both went to his ashram. Both did spinning regularly; Kamaladevi also learnt weaving.

Gradually, their plan to start a nationwide theatre movement began to take shape. Harindranath wrote the plays and composed the music, Kamaladevi helped with the sets and the costumes. He played the hero, and she played the heroine. Kamaladevi said, "We felt the drama and the theatre were important social factors in life." The plays revolved around social problems such as the caste system and untouchability.

In 1923, Kamaladevi's first and only child, Rama, was born. He was named after Ramakrishna Paramhansa, the great religious leader and reformer. Rama inherited a fine singing voice from his mother and a flair for acting from both parents. As soon as he was old enough, he went with his parents on their tours, playing child roles and singing. The group would have become a permanent organization but Harindranath went abroad again. When he came back, the 1930 struggle had started and they were plunged into politics. Kamaladevi joined the national struggle first as a volunteer. Later she became an organizer of women workers in the Indian National Congress. Finally she became a member of the Working Committee of the Congress.

In 1928-29, Kamaladevi played a minor role in a film 'Vasantsena'. But she loved the theatre much more. She set up the Indian National Theatre in 1945 at Bombay. When, in 1946, the International Theatre Institute was set up by UNESCO with its headquarters in Paris, Kamaladevi organized the Indian unit later called the Bharatiya Natya Sangh.

In order to teach Indians their own heritage, she set up a Theatre Crafts Museum and organized the first folk drama festival in Delhi in 1946.

From the fifties, Kamaladevi began to study theatre abroad. In this connection she went to U.S.A., U.S.S.R., Hungary, Asia and Japan. The Government sent her on many of these trips. Day after day, she saw plays, puppets shows in Czechoslovakia.

As chairman of the All India Handicrafts Board, to which she was elected in 1952, she had to identify theatre crafts. These included costumes, headgear, jewellery, puppets, masks and musical instruments.

Ebrahim Alkazi, former Director of the National School of Drama, remembered that she used to climb six flights of steps (there was no lift) to attend performance after performance in his theatre in Bombay.

## **In politics**

Kamaladevi heard that Gandhiji was starting a Satyagraha Sabha (February 1919), members of which took a pledge to oppose and disobey the Rowlatt Act by which the Government could imprison anyone without trial and conviction in a court of law, and to court imprisonment. He was to be in Bombay on April 6, 1919, to launch the movement. It was here that she had her first glimpse of the great man and heard him speak.

She enrolled as a humble volunteer for work at the Belgaum Congress in 1924, over which Gandhiji presided. She was very proud of the fact that her political

life started with a broom and a basket. There were long marches, vigorous exercises and standing on guard over the camps at night.

A few months later when she was in bed recovering from typhoid, she recorded her experiences as a volunteer. This was her first effort at serious writing, which gave her a lot of comfort.

Kamaladevi began to give a lot of time to the Seva Dal. She joined the central training academy where physical culture was taught. In this were the old exercises like lathi, *Danda*, *Bhala*, sword and dagger play, *Surya-namaskars* and various yogasanas. No volunteer was paid. They were only provided food and clothing.

The Seva Dal gave the Congress flag a national status and a regular ceremonial was worked out for hoisting and lowering it. Singing songs of the pride and glory of the flag became an integral part of the ceremony.

In 1927 the Congress asked Kamaladevi to organize a volunteer corps in Madras. She now became a member of the party, and was elected to the All India Congress Committee in December 1928. She was also elected Secretary of the Indian Social Conference. Kamaladevi gave up the secretaryship after a year because her work was disrupted by the political happenings within the country as a preparation for the Civil Disobdience movement of 1930.

For some time now Kamaladevi had made Pune her base. It was the centre of nationalistic activity. It was the home of great reformers like Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and M.G. Ranade who fought hard for improving the status of women.

The Poona Seva Sadar was headed by Janakibai Bhat and Yamunabai Bhat, both quiet and highly disciplined women on whom Kamaladevi came to rely more and more. Her stay in Pune also brought her in contact with the Servants of India Society. She had heard of it as a young girl, of Gokhale and this organization he had set up to serve the country.

Kamaladevi had never met Gokhale but had read his speeches and writings which her mother got from Pune. She was deeply impressed and got her first idea of service from this source—that while one lived one must serve one's fellow beings. The first important member of the society she met was V.S. Srinivasa Sastri. When he was touring the country, in 1923, talking about the plight of Indians in South Africa, he pressed her to speak with him. Naturally, Kamaladevi was very nervous. She was barely twenty, and apart from debates at school, she had never made any speech. When she did summon enough courage to address a meeting and saw the praise in the local papers ("She came, she spoke, she conquered" blazed the headlines the next day), Kamaladevi knew that she had the gift.

### **Women's cause**

Pune was selected as the venue for the conference on the new educational policies in 1927 since at that time it was a very busy centre of women's education. Most of the activities came to be centred around the Seva Sadar whose leaders took on the everyday chores. Kamaladevi

offered her services as a volunteer to do the humblest chores and took up her post at the railway station on night duty to meet the arriving delegates. She realized the importance of the occasion for, from this conference was born the All India Women's Conference which was to play a key role in the national affairs of the country, especially in the changing position of Indian women, for about thirty years.

Here Kamaladevi met most of the women leaders of her time. As the conference drew to an end, Sarojini Naidu gave her the invitation from the general assembly to accept the General Secretaryship. Before she could protest and refuse, Sarojini Naidu was on her feet to deliver the vote of thanks. Kamaladevi was in a panic. She confided to Greta her fear of disgracing herself in front of all the grand ladies.

Kamaladevi took her secretaryship very seriously. She managed the office herself. In fact, she was the office. She took lessons in shorthand and taught herself typing. She did all the work, including the mailing of letters at the post office. She said, "I am very glad I did all that because it made me very self-reliant."

For travel to various conferences, Kamaladevi persuaded the railway authorities to give a concession so that a double journey could be made on a single ticket which held good for the whole month. Freed from the burdens of home and children, the women enjoyed taking long trips on their own.

Constant contact with women of low income groups made Kamaladevi aware of the kind of life they led. She took a keen interest in the problems of women workers.

In Madurai, the big textile mill owners had put notices asking the workers to dissolve their union. Kamaladevi's speeches encouraged the women to refuse to do so and they dissuaded their husbands, in turn. She was the first organizer of trade unions in Mangalore district.

The Women's Conference took up the problems of women labour. Kamaladevi conducted surveys in Bengal and Assam. In the 1930s, when India began to export cashewnuts, much attention was paid to the smooth surface of the kernel. To avoid chipping it, the workers, all of whom were women, were not permitted to use knives. This meant that they could only use their finger nails. Mangalore was a big cashew centre; Kamaladevi organized a strike in protest. It was successful and the knife was introduced.

Kamaladevi's position as General Secretary had many unusual side effects. She became a frequent visitor to the Assembly building in New Delhi, now known as the Parliament House. Here she met noted personalities of the day such as Lala Lajpat Rai, Dewar Chunar Lal, Tulsi Goswami, R.K. Shanmukham Chetti and Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

Once she went to Motilal Nehru with some literature to ask for his help. He replied, "Do you really expect us to take all this seriously from a slip of a girl like you?" Kamaladevi was struck dumb. She wished the floor would open and swallow her. But courageously she replied, "If you wish, I can bring many elderly, grey-haired women in my place." This first meeting resulted in an invitation to Anand Bhavan at Allahabad and Kamaladevi's friendship with the Nehru family.

In 1929 Kamaladevi went to Europe to attend several international conferences. This European tour was for her, full of exciting events. In Berlin, Kamaladevi felt unhappy that while the other countries had their own flag, Indians were huddled under the British Union Jack. She complained to the organizers that the flag of her country was missing. They replied that they did not know that India had a flag. Kamaladevi insisted that India did have a flag and she would produce it for hoisting. The Indian delegates cut up bits of their saris to make up the colours of the Indian flag—white, green, and orange.

### **Impetus to tradition**

After her tour of Europe, Kamaladevi came back with new and fresh ideas. Folk dances were encouraged in schools. It had become a tradition to have an exhibition of handicrafts produced by women and an entertainment programme by the delegates. Kamaladevi sought out dramatic forms and tried to encourage the troupes performing them. So also with crafts. In particular, she collected traditional textile designs, many of which she made into khadi. This put her on the path which, many years later, she could pick up and work into with quite spectacular results.

The burning issue of the day in 1929 was the fight for ‘Purna Swaraj’ (complete freedom). Kamaladevi spoke at a gathering of five thousand people. At this time she was at the height of her beauty. Small built, with large, lustrous eyes, long, fine hair, small hands and feet, she was called the ‘supremely romantic figure of the freedom

struggle'. She wore a typical Maharashtrian saree, pearl ear-rings and a big *bindi*. The audience listened to her, spellbound.

January 26, 1930, was the day for taking the pledge to work towards Independence. Azad maidan (open ground), on that afternoon, was a seething mass of people assembled in hundreds of thousands to take the pledge. All faces were turned towards the flagpole on which the beloved tricolour had been hoisted.

Kamaladevi was very close to the pole when a small group with a red flag bearing the sickle and hammer made a dash for it and tried to put their flag next to the national flag. The red flag tore in the confusion and its bearers rushed to tear the tricolour in revenge. Conscious of nothing but the urgency of the immediate task, Kamaladevi threw her body against the flagpole and held it tightly with both hands, unmindful of the bruises on her hands from which the blood was soon trickling.

The crowd was singing wildly around her and the flag when she heard a voice saying, "Bravo! Well done! She saved our flag from dishonour." A man gently wiped the blood from her hands. He was Chandra Bher Johri, who was the real founder of the Vanar Sena, the Monkey Army, consisting of children trained to carry messages and perform many other tasks that adults could not.

As the Civil Disobedience movement gathered force, 'salt' suddenly became a powerful word. The country watched as Gandhiji launched the movement with his historic march from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi on the Gujarat sea coast, a distance of about 200 miles, to break the salt laws on March 12, 1930.

When preparations for the march were being made, it was suggested that women should be included among the volunteers. Kamaladevi met Gandhiji and requested him to allow some women to join the march. She said, "If women are allowed to join the march, it will give them a sense of responsibility and dedication." Sure enough, Kamaladevi and Anartikabai Gokhale were included in the first batch of law breakers.

The salt was prepared and the next step was to sell it. Kamaladevi arrived at the Bombay Share Bazaar to sell the salt by auction. The first packet sold for Rs. 501. In half an hour she made Rs. 4,000.

One day she twisted the tail of the British lion by selling the packets of salt within the High Court itself.

A mass raid on the salt pans just outside Bombay was planned by Kamaladevi. Her task was to bring in large numbers of people. On the eve of the raid, June 1, 1930, Kamaladevi was arrested. Her representative was Rama, only seven years old, who proudly carried the banner. The magistrate before whom she appeared sentenced her to six months simple imprisonment. He said that she had been responsible for more people breaking the law than almost anybody else!

There was unrest all over the country in 1930. The Satyagraha movement carried on along with more violent activity. After her release in 1931, Kamaladevi was put in charge of the Sewak Dal volunteers. She had to train women for a variety of jobs, from first-aid to fire-fighting to facing lathis and bullets.

By this time the separation from her husband, Harindranath, had become final. Kamaladevi felt she

could not carry on her fight for Independence if she was hindered at every step by his family. Around the time that Kamaladevi was in jail, Harindranath went to Aurobindo Ashram and stayed there for three years. Rama was in Mangalore. He passed around from his father to his maternal grandmother and then to his father's family; he was well-adjusted and enjoyed being wherever he was.

Rama passed the High School examination in 1939. As there was a lull in the political movement, Kamaladevi took the opportunity to see him settled in a good college abroad. They visited the Scandinavian countries where cooperatives were strongly developed. Kamaladevi studied their working. Having crossed the Arctic Circle, Rama and she watched the midnight sun. They did some trekking and mountain climbing.

Kamaladevi, meanwhile, was invited to tea at the White House with Mrs. Roosevelt. On January 12, 1941, *The Bombay Chronicle* carried a picture of a party given in Kamaladevi's honour in Hollywood. The general impression about India in the United States was that it was a land of yoga, snakes, and fortune-tellers. Once in New York, a young girl came up, stretched out her palm, and said, "Ma'am, please read my palm."

## Writings

On her return to India, she wrote about her experiences in addition to many other works. Among them were *America—The Land of Superlatives*, *Uncle Sam's Empire*, *Towards a National Theatre*. Besides this, she began to organize a camp for the All India Women's Conference

at Abrama, Surat. Kamaladevi was elected President of the Conference. It was 1942, and the country was going through momentous political events.

For two years, Kamaladevi was put in prison, where she spent her days reading and writing. When she was released in 1944, she undertook an extensive tour of India. Many orphanages and homes, which had been set up during the Bengal famine in 1942-43, had been neglected. Now Kamaladevi, with the slogan "Save the Children", made these her special concern, and started institutions where children were looked after and also given some education. She was responsible for young people getting scholarships for training in care and education of children.

Next, finding that no proper medical facilities existed outside Bombay city, Kamaladevi hit up on the idea of mobile health vans.

She also mooted the idea of hostels for working girls. To this Kamaladevi gave her full attention and working girls' hostels were set up not only in the big cities but in district towns as well. Her contribution in this field has been recognized by naming the All India Women's Conference hostel in Delhi after her.

In 1946, Kamaladevi was made a member of the prestigious Congress Working Committee. But she refused to sit in the Assembly. She had no interest in politics as such. Her involvement in it had been for a cause—that of freedom—and once achieved she was not going to let anyone persuade her to stay with it.

As she wrote in an article, 'Reflections After Sixty' in the *Bharat Jyoti* of January 23, 1966, "When India was freed, I personally was freed. I left the highway of politics

to step into the side-lane of constructive work, with the artisans, the artists, those who create and produce things of beauty.”

Many important posts were offered to Kamaladevi. She refused a Cabinet post, and later Ambassadorship to Moscow and Cairo.

Now that she was free, she could use her freedom to do things which were after her own heart.

The grandeur and pagentry of the ceremony of transfer of power from Britain to India at one minute past midnight on August 15, 1947, was a great joy to every Indian. But with the partition of India and Pakistan, millions had to flee from their homes. Kitchens and hospitals were set up for their immediate need. Kamaladevi alone thought of the future of these people. She visited Kingsway Camp everyday, asking, “What is being done to help these people put down roots?”

It was the month of September 1947. Kamaladevi watched with tears in her eyes the thousands of poor people pouring into the Capital. Then the idea struck her, “Could not all those scattered from their perches like leaves by a high wind come together, pool their talents and gifts, and make a new life for themselves?” The answer, to her, was co-operation.

She wrote: “From childhood, I had longed to create something new. I had played with crayons and paints, with clay and wood; written hymns and songs; designed and made little things; above all, I had dreamed of a great drama and to act in it. Here was what I had waited for all my life—a vast canvas, human clay, and the stage provided by life itself.”

Today, the Indian Co-operative Union has 25 agricultural societies attached to it, with a membership of 1,500 families!

Another first to Kamaladevi's credit, which has often been copied, was the integrated credit system. Loans were made to farmers and they were given expert advice. Kamaladevi insisted that vegetables, fruits, and flowers be grown along with agricultural crops and dairy and poultry development.

The women had Kamaladevi's special attention and she organized a number of women's co-operatives which covered everything from making garments, processing foodstuffs and spices; making pickles, chutneys and paper; embroidery and toy-making. She brought the weavers together, arranged credit and other facilities for them and organized handloom co-operatives.

She received the Ramon Magasaysay International Award for community leadership in 1966.

## **Handicrafts**

The All India Handicrafts Board came into being in 1952. Kamaladevi, who had given many designs for making khadi attractive and had fallen into the habit of collecting handicrafts from every place she visited, was the obvious choice for Chairman.

She took over the Cottage Emporium, and it became the most exciting handicrafts shop in the Capital. Kamaladevi felt that these handicrafts helped India to progress. She set out to identify the crafts. This again involved endless travel—this time to small villages,

unexplored corners of the country. No place was too remote and no craftsman too humble for her to visit. Once Kamaladevi wished to visit a woman in Chamba, who was famous for her embroidery. "But you cannot go there. It is a dirty and poor locality," the officials told her. Nevertheless she went to meet the talented woman, who cried with gratitude. Kamaladevi recommended her for an award and the next year the lady stood up in the midst of a large gathering to receive her prize.

In Paithan, famous for its beautiful sarees, Kamaladevi found only a few weavers. She collected them into a group, and brought their work to Delhi.

In Kashmir, the craftsmen called her "Hastakala Ma" (Handicrafts Mother), and showed her their best work.

She also helped revive the lovely weaves of Baluch and Tancoi, as well as the rich, heavy Jamawar shawls of Kashmir.

Once the crafts and craftsmen had been located, the next step was to preserve and develop the craft. Exhibitions were held in India and abroad. Design centres were set up in areas famous for their crafts, and traditional designs were collected.

Kamaladevi, a great lover of music, and a musician herself, was very unhappy at the poor appearance and tone of Indian musical instruments. She set up a centre for their manufacture on genuine traditional lines in Madras.

Centres for puppetry, and Kalamkari paintings were set up.

In 1962, as Chairman of the Handicrafts Board, Kamaladevi toured the North East Frontier Agency

(Arunachal Pradesh) and Nagaland, again the first Indian woman to do so. She was motivated by wanting to do something for the tribal people.

All this exposed the great wealth of crafts in the country, making handicrafts the single largest industry providing employment to over a million people.

Kamaladevi's greatest effort was towards raising the status of craftsmen. She felt that they were artists. When she received the fellowship of the Sangeet Natak Akademi she felt that thanks should be given to the artisans.

## **Awards**

She started national awards for craftsmen. Every year since then, they come to Delhi to receive awards from the President of India.

In 1956, she toured West Africa to study their crafts. When the Negro Arts Festival was held in 1967, in Dakar, Senegal, she was invited as a guest of the President.

In 1964, the World Crafts Council was being set up, with its headquarters in New York. Kamaladevi was asked to bring in the Asian countries as participants. She was made the Vice-President of the Council.

Kamaladevi represented India at many international conferences. She was the Indian Government's delegate to UNESCO and the Human Rights Commission.

In between all this, she found time to send two baby elephants to the children of Los Angeles, U.S.A., and Australia. They were presented on behalf of the Bharatiya

Natya Sangh. One elephant was called Geeta, and the other Kamala, after its donor.

Now awards came to Kamaladevi thick and fast. In 1962 she received the Watumull Foundation Award instituted in Honolulu, Hawaii, for service in social and economic fields. The President of Czechoslovakia awarded her the country's gold medal for promoting International Understanding. The Vishvabharati University honoured her with its Desikottama degree. She was so modest that when in 1966 she heard that the Magasaysay Award was to be given to her, she was very surprised. "There must be some mistake," she said. "It is given only to great people."

Kamaladevi's life covered more than half a century of the most exciting period of Indian history and her activities have ranged from politics, through theatre, women's rights and crafts to co-operation.

The freedom struggle brought women out of their homes, and *en masse* to take part in the epic battle underway. This did not happen naturally, but was the result of great effort on the part of social reformers and trend-setters like Kamaladevi.

Kamaladevi had been a lonely child. She grew up into a shy, retiring girl who hated facing crowds and even asking her way around. Fate willed otherwise.

She carried her ideal of service to the craftsmen and their crafts to the point of gifting all her immovable property and the major part of the cash that came with the Magasaysay Award to the Srinivas Malliah Trust for Theatre Crafts.

Her constant travels kept her in touch with the latest

world trends in the realm of theatre, design and crafts. She worked closely with young people, not only guiding them but, as she says, “Learning from them. It is not a one-way traffic.”

In a very touching radio talk entitled ‘Ah, if I were 21 again’, Kamaladevi gave a glimpse of all that she missed in life. She said, “...but if I were 21, starting life, I would hold the little things to my bosom, and let the big things go by. I would keep loads of time for reading and writing, spend time with my son, have lots and lots of music; play and sing and dream music.”

She married Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, whose musical and histrionic talents were matched only by his poetic idealism. They married for “sharing of dreams and ambitions” and to devote themselves to create a new theatre in India.

A leading spirit behind India’s cultural renaissance, she worked hard throughout her life to make the crafts of India famous. Travelling to nooks and corners of Indian villages, she personally contacted the crafts-persons, gave them new patterns and ideas on how to mix tradition with modern trends.

Kamaladevi died in Bombay on October 29, 1988, at the Breach Candy Hospital where she was admitted after she felt unwell at the Shilpi Utsav, an All India Exhibition of Handicrafts. She was eighty-five.

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